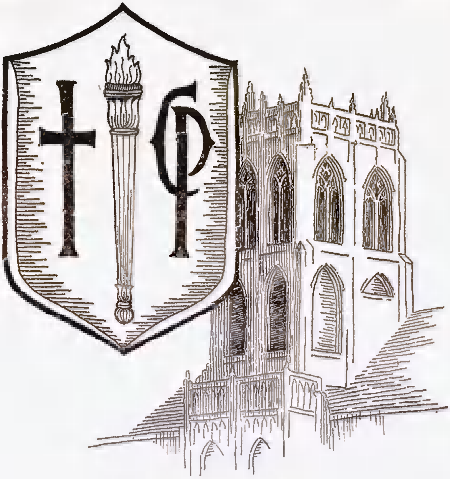

COLLEGE
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CHEAT-THE-BOYS

BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

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Stockton, Calif.

CHEAT-THE-BOYS

A STORY OF THE DEVONSHIRE ORCHARDS

BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

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CHEAT-THE-BOYS

CHAPTER I

TRYST

The lane forked right and left under a great hill, and while the eastern branch ascended presently, climbed upward and disappeared between banks of red loam, the left-hand way stretched north into wide, green water-meadows, where ran a stream and opened withy-beds and a reed-rond. Gentle hills ascended on every side of these glimmering flats and a winter sun illuminated them.

It was afternoon and a man waited at the fork of the lane while, half a mile distant, a woman made preparations to meet him.

The man walked up and down with his face turned to the ground. From time to time he glanced down the road whence the woman would come; then his neck bent again as though the weight of matters in his brain pressed upon it. He was tall and broad in the shoulders, with a fine chest, but below the belt he fell away and his legs knocked a little at the knees. He had a fair and kindly face with clear, slate-coloured eyes, a straight, well-shaped nose, low forehead and large, amber moustache, which was not curled away from his gentle mouth, but hung in a curtain over it. As his body, so his face fell away beneath. It ended with a feeble chin deeply cloven in the midst. His expression in repose indicated extreme amiability; but at this moment, before an approaching ordeal of the utmost importance to him, the man looked anxious and his eyes roamed nervously. He was dressed in a grey Norfolk jacket, with trousers turned up to keep them out of the mud. He also wore yellow boots and a blue tie beneath a soft collar fastened with a little silver hunting-horn. On his head was a black bowler hat. He carried no stick and his hands were in his pockets as he strode up and down. He looked at his watch from time to time and sighed, for the woman was half an hour late and still empty lay the valley road by which she must arrive. Presently he walked in the direction of his thoughts and followed the way until a white-faced dwelling appeared, where the vale narrowed northward and the solitary building marked its end.

There stood Withy Lease, a little homestead with which went the withies and the reeds, the grazing-grounds, the stream and the beds of water-cress. It was a freehold property of some twenty acres, and a widow farmed it and owned it, making shift to win a livelihood therefrom. She was seventy-three but of a thin and active habit—quick and agile as the water-voles that lived upon the banks of her stream.

Now, on this Sunday afternoon, she sat and watched the woman who was setting out to meet the man; and in her brown eyes and mobile, withered face homed anxiety and doubt as great as his. Life had left the widow little. Her husband was dead, her two sons were dead, her two daughters were dead; but the last had found time to wed and become a mother. Jane Neck's only child, a girl, was now an orphan and lived with her grandmother, the last of a local clan whose record, on gravestones at Higher Marldon, dated back two hundred years. With the old woman the family name would disappear.

Now Jennifer Purchase sat on the bed in an upper chamber of Withy Lease and watched young Gilyan Neck make ready to meet the man.

Gilyan resembled a dead mother, famous for her beauty, but Mrs. Purchase always declared the girl to be far lovelier than her own daughter, Jane, who had married John Neck, brought Gilyan into the world and soon afterwards passed from it herself. She died of the family ailment—tuberculosis—which had also destroyed her father and her brothers. Young Gilyan, however, proved untainted by any parental weakness. She stood five feet nine and was straight, slim, healthy in every particular and very perfectly proportioned. Her hair was flaxen pale, yet quick to reflect sunshine; her eyebrows were darker than her hair and finely arched; her evasive and lovely eyes were of a pale blue. They could be steady and steadfast when she pleased, or when a challenge demanded it; but a disappointed man here and there had learned to hate them. "Look out when her eyes be fixed so firm as a rock on yours," said Mark Fawden, her grandmother's right-hand man, "for then she's lying most." 'Frog' Fawden spoke quite impartially, for he was proud of the young woman and admitted her beauty and charm. Himself he was an old bachelor, who had never desired to be otherwise, but perhaps he understood Gilyan better than her own generation. Her mouth was the most utterly lovely thing about her. To describe it is impossible save in similes. It was Greek, a little drooping in repose, full in the bow, of a delicious, ripe strawberry freshness. Now she had pouted it, while she set a brooch upon the muslin round her throat and listened to old Jennifer piping in thin and fretful speech.

"You might tell me who the man is, Gilyan. 'Tis right I should know."

"You'll know soon enough, gran'."

"There's such a lot after you, and you treat 'em so bad. You be making enemies by it and I was terrible put about last week when I met James Woodley, the horseman at Orchard Lands."

"Why for? What could Jimmy say to fluster you?"

The girl spoke in a voice of a pleasant, cooing quality, with a note that seemed to give warmth to every word. She did not lisp, yet there was a little croon and catch in her speech that made men wild and women forgiving. But it was a wayward voice.

"He told me the name they've given you in the Marldons since—since Nicholas Snow."

"Oh—that? I know. That was Matthew Fawden's little joke—to call me after the cider apple, that looks so lovely and turns out so sharp: 'Cheat-the-Boys.'"

Gilyan laughed.

"No laughing matter, I do assure you," declared her grandmother. "For a girl to get a name like that be a very cruel, dreadful affair in my opinion, and I'll give Matthew the edge of my tongue next time I meet him."

"Jimmy Woodley wants to marry me all the same, and so does Arthur Partridge. Both Orchard Lands men; and old Matthew haven't frightened them with the new name for me. I wish he had. I hate the pair of 'em."

Gilyan set her hat on her flaxen locks. It was a dark-blue hat, to match her home-made serge gown and jacket, and a pale-blue feather crowned it.

"It ban't Partridge, then, you're going to meet—nor yet Woodley? For God's love next time you say 'yes,' mean it."

"I've never said 'yes' yet—wish I may die if I have," declared the girl. "When a man's in love, he'll only hear what he wants to. Plain English be wasted on 'em."

"Why for can't you let the men alone?"

"I like them," said Gilyan. "They're a lot more amusing than women; they know more and there's more to 'em—fools though they are about courting. But they can't take me in the same friendly spirit I take them. If you give 'em 'good evening' they get above themselves. And, anyway, the chap who ever said I was tokened to him is a liar."

"Men hate a jill-flirt," warned Mrs. Purchase, "and you may get left yet, for all your beauty."

"I shan't get left, gran'."

"I'd much wish to see you married and settled for your own sake. Withy Lease will be yours, of course, such as it is; but it don't carry the money it did. Straw have took the place of reed now-a-days, so Mark says. It's a poor living for the pair of us these times and like to be poorer."

Gilyan kissed her grandmother.

"So it is then, and I'll soon take a well-to-do-sort of man and let you free, and help you belike, as you've helped me. All the same I wish I could have waited a bit longer, and maybe got the chance to fly a bit higher."

"Don't think again about this here man today if you don't love him. A thousand times better wait ten years if need be, for the right one."

Gilyan did not answer. She pulled on a pair of black thread gloves, looked at her hat once more in a little square glass, then turned to go.

"I could much wish you'd tell me his name, my dear," persisted the ancient.

"No, grandmother. I may be mistook. I've kept him half an hour over the time anyway. They're often the tenderer for keeping, though sometimes it don't pay to keep 'em. But it will with this man."

"You be hard as a stone wall under your smiles and twinkles," said Mrs. Purchase. "I see myself again in you, worse luck, and the sins of the grandchild be visited on the grandmother. Your mother was a very different creature from you or me, Gilyan."

Gilyan exhibited some interest.

"You liked the men, then?"

"Yes, I did," answered Jennifer—"a proper, wicked, little thing I was—till I married."

"You hateful old woman, gran'!"

"Yes—now. I weren't hateful at your age. I were terrible nice."

"It's more than the young can do to picture what you old ones were like—once," said Gilyan. "I suppose lots of you brown, crumpled, withered old folk were beautiful and had your day and a trail of men after you."

"The pretty women don't get the best husbands."

"Why not, then?"

"Easily answered. I'll tell you why when you come back-along. For the minute, if you've kept a good, honest man that is going to offer to marry you, cooling his heels for half an hour, you'd best to get going, or you may find he puts punctuality higher than even you."

"Wish me luck."

"I wish you sense not to say 'yes' unless you love him better'n anything else on God's earth."

"I wouldn't say but what I do, though that's not to say much either. He's good and rich."

"And clever, I hope. 'Tis most important for the man that marries you to be clever. I had a clever one—lucky for me—and cleverness makes more happy homes than cash do."

Gilyan set forth. She walked well, having once observed the difference between an educated gait and the usual scutter of country women. "I hate to see they go-by-the-grounds pashing along in the mud, or the dust," she said to a man once, who told her she walked as if the place belonged to her. The fact that she was so late did not hasten her steps and she picked the clean tracks of the rough road. It wound along past the domains of Withy Lease, where spread emerald bright meadows, blotted with darker passages of bulrush and broken here and there by russet red molehills, bright as jewels in the winter sunshine. The water-meadows sloped to a still and placid stream, that wound away among them and then slipped into wider bottoms of sedge and sallow. Beyond, the reed-rond extended, now sere and grey, with ghostly plumes of arundo still spiring up out of the tangle. Behind them opened a little mere, where moor-hen and dab-chick dwelt, and lower yet, at the broadest span of Withy Lease, stood the golden willows, now naked of leaves, making warmth against the cool grey of the hills that heaved behind them.

Here water-cress spread, where the stream shelved over sandy shallows, and occasioned ceaseless feud with tramps who refused to regard water-cress as anything but common property. In winter came woodcock and snipe also; and Mark Fawden shot them for Mrs. Purchase and sent them to market on her account.

Here and there a bridge crossed the stream; in springtime the pussy willows and the gold and lemon of kingcup and iris amid the silver lacing of the waters made the Lease gay; while in summer the marshes shone with orange rag-weed, clouds of meadow-sweet and willow-herb, purple loosestrife and the velvet, ebony clubs of the great reedmace.

A hundred yards from their tryst the tall young man met Gilyan. He took off his hat, while she was still some distance away, and hastened forward. His speed was very rapid; his movements a little ungainly. She did not increase her own pace, but welcomed him with a very lovely smile. For a moment he held her black thread glove in his red dogskin; then he shook her hand very warmly and spoke. His voice was deep, but hesitating. This hesitation was habitual and not due to present nervousness. His voice reflected Warner Lidstone's character in large degree.

"I began to think something must be the matter," he said.

"Something was the matter. A lot of duck-chicks got up stream across the road, and our birds are my work. 'Frog' wouldn't move to 'em, so I had to do it; and a proper jakes of a mess I got in—Sunday and all. So I fell late; and once you begin being late, you're late all day."

"So you are then—a very true word. And 'Frog' as they call him, is like his brother, my man at Orchard Lands. Matthew Fawden has the same jealous rule—never to lay finger to a piece of work that ain't his own."

"Silly old fools both of 'em," declared she.

"Not fools."

They had reached the forking road and Gilyan asked a question, though very well she knew the answer.

"Where are you going to take me for our walk, Mr. Lidstone?"

Her frank eyes were upon his and her voice was tuned to an uninterested inquiry.

Warner Lidstone lifted his arm and pointed where the stump of an ancient windmill dominated the great hill before them. The dismantled and shattered tower could be clearly seen against the sky-line easterly.

"We're going up over, Miss Neck," he said firmly, and Gilyan showed sudden emotion.

"You don't mean——?"

"By God I do!" he said. "I mean just that. 'Tis there, or nowhere."

She stared into his flushed face with apparent astonishment, while he showed excitement and waited tensely for her reply.

Simple-sounding words in this connection meant far more than their face value and a mere walk to the ruin.

Gilyan dropped her eyes.

"Oh, fancy!" she murmured, then hesitated while the man breathed hard. After some tremendous moments, she looked at him again.

"It must be as you please, Mr. Lidstone."

"Ah!"

He gave a joyful and guttural gurgle and they set forth together. But soon she bade him go slower.

"I can't travel so fast, please. You forget how long your legs are."

"I forget everything on earth but where we're going to," he said.

There was a new familiarity in her speech that delighted the young man. He begged to be forgiven and considered her steps as he moderated his stride.

"Two paces of mine be just about equal to three of yours," he said, after watching her feet for a few minutes.

She smiled sedately but did not answer. Then silence fell between them as the lane grew steeper.

CHAPTER II

AT THE WINDMILL

Compton Windmill was a classic meeting-place for Higher and Lower Marldon folk under certain emotional conditions. Its ruined stump of red conglomerate stone broke the sky-line of a rounded hill at a spot—lonely as hill-tops are wont to be. It stood amid fertile lands, now under corn, now roots, now suffered to remain in grass, until presently they are ploughed again. A great, steep field fell westerly, and from its summit the view of arable, forest and river valley faded away to Dartmoor's ramparts, where they hove aloft across the north in winter colours, from Hey Tor to Rippon, from Buckland Beacon to the dim cone of Brent Hill and the ragged granites of Ugborough Beacon beyond it. All was soaked with sad grey and cold purple, for the sun had now departed behind a bank of iron-coloured cloud and twilight promised to bring more rain.

Over a crop of turnip, already in course of pulling, Warner Lidstone and his companion now approached the empty cone of the Windmill; a shell from which the life had long fled. It opened to the sky and might be penetrated by breaches in the wall and the legitimate entrance, from which the door had long vanished. There were apertures at the height of a shoulder in the thickness of the stone, where windows once had been, and in the midst of the mud and withered grass upon the floor, reposed an old grindstone, as though to mark the vanished uses of the place. This hypæthral temple, once lifted to Ceres, now dedicated to Love, rose in a ragged tonsure of stone where in summer yellow hawkweeds and blue jasione wove a garland, but now only faded grass hung from the walls. Worshippers came in couples at all times and seasons, for unwritten law had, through a space of near a century, demanded that the local man who would marry a local maid, must hither bring her and put the question within these withered ruins.

Thus a curious state of things was created and offers of marriage were made by implication. Shy men found the Windmill exceedingly convenient: it simplified courting, heartened the anxious male in the one event and helped to cover his face and shorten his sufferings in another. For if the desired one refused any invitation to walk windmillward, that ended the matter where faint hearts were concerned; while an agreement to visit the significant spot was more than halfway to saying "yes," when the fateful question came.

Hence young Lidstone's emotions on learning that Gilyan was prepared to accompany him to the hill-top. Now they stood within the magic circle and the man spoke.

"You'll find it warmer in here out of this cold wind," he said.

But the wind was not cold: it blew damp and mild from the west. Warner stood for a moment looking far away to the hills and considering the words to be spoken. They had been orderly in his memory when he started. For many nights he had rehearsed them until they flowed with due humility and craft. He was prepared to admit his own unworthiness, yet couple with it certain advantages that he had to offer, should Gilyan find herself able to look so low. But now the phrases had fled, and they might as well have been a flock of golden plover on distant Rippon for all the use they promised to Lidstone of Orchard Lands.

Meanwhile the maiden, who was not paying her first visit to the Windmill, amused herself with the evidences of votaries. Upon the old plaster, as high as a man could reach, were scratched, or written in pencil, the initials of generations, set close together in pairs. Occasionally a scroll surrounded them and a flourish of art awakened by some lad's triumph; but for the most part lovers obeyed old custom baldly and the combined letters—the man's above, the girl's beneath—did no more than record the beginning of a united adventure. Businesslike men added the date; once a bruised spirit had been at the trouble to climb again—alone—and erase the record with harsh, cross cuts of his knife.

Gilyan, however, could survey the inscriptions with a good conscience. No man had ever won the right to set her initial letters with his own upon these storied walls. She exclaimed presently, while Warner still looked out over the earth and considered his speech. Her sharp eyes had found a new chronicle.

"Look here! 'J. B.' and 'C. T.' Do you know what that means, Mr. Lidstone?"

He turned, seeing an opening and desiring to waste no more time.

"It means some lucky chap has had 'yes' for an answer."

"How d'you know he was lucky? But I believe he was this time. Johnny Bulley's the nephew of Weston Bulley—potman at my uncle's public house; and he's a very nice man, and last time I was at Higher Marldon, he told me he was going to offer. And 'C. T.'—you know who that is?"

"No, I don't."

"Oh, yes, you do—very well, too—better than you know me, I expect. Seen her oftener, anyway."

He considered and remembered.

"Clara Toms, of course. Yes, we heard about it last week. Clara's our cook, and mother's very glad she's got such a good chap and terrible sorry she's going to leave Orchard Lands."

"There they are," said Gilyan and pointed to the initials in a formal, black square. "Now I'd have thought Johnny would have drawn a heart round 'em."

Lidstone looked at the scribbled walls.

"There won't be much room soon," he said.

"People will have to be more thoughtful for others and not write so large," she answered.

And then the man asked her to wed him, and she listened and added the recollection of another offer of marriage to those that had gone before. Even as he spoke, in loud and steady tones, she reflected that this was the last time she would ever hear such words, or any like them, for she had long ago determined to accept the speaker. And Warner, by a strange coincidence, voiced the identical idea in his proposal.

"It's not the first time you've heard what I want to say," he began, "but I much hope it will be the last, Gilyan. For 'Gilyan' I must call you."

"So long as you don't call me 'Cheat-the-Boys,' Mr. Lidstone."

" 'Warner' to you, please; and more than that. I want to be everything to you—everything in the world. For why? Because you're everything to me. Yes, faith, I've been slow coming to it—for your sake more than my own. I've waited, though my inner voice shouted for me to be up and about it before I lost you; but I waited to ask myself if ever a sober-sided sort of man like me could make you right down happy. And I've looked on and now, I do think I know you. And if love sharpens the wits, then I ought to know all about you. I love you with all my soul, and if you'll marry me, you'll have a man to worship you faithfully and come between you and the rough edge of life for evermore. What d'you say? Have you ever thought what I was after? No doubt you have."

She nodded, then she offered her hand to him and he caught it between his own and waited for her to speak.

"I knew you had got to care for me; but I kept it terrible quiet, because it seemed like as if it was too good to be true, Mr. Lidstone. And I knew it, because I'd got to care for you. I love you and I'm properly proud you really love me."

"My God!" said Warner. "And don't even want to keep me waiting while you think about it!"

"I have thought about it. I'm not clever, but——"

"There—there—you darling, blessed dear—no 'buts.' You love me—you said the words! 'Tis almost too big a thought for my wits. 'Clever?' Don't everybody know you're so clever as you're lovely? But I'm clever too! My stars, I must be a damned sight cleverer than I thought, or my mother thought, or anybody, to have got the top flower of the bunch like you! Thank God for His goodness, I'm sure."

So honestly amazed was he that simple wonder seemed to come between him and Gilyan herself at that great moment. Then he came back to her and his eyes, that had roamed the distant scene while he spoke, settled upon her face. He put his arms round her, still marvelling, and she lifted up her wonderful lips.

He kissed her and took fire and babbled; and she kissed him back.

"I love you; I love you, Warner," she said, "and I'll always love you and be proud to make your life happy if I can. There was never anybody else for me when first I dared to think you began to care. I swear t'other men are shadows beside you."

"And other females—what are they? Ghosts to me, and always were for that matter after I got to know you, Gilyan."

"Your mother's no ghost, nor yet your sister, Lucy. What will they think? I'm parlous feared about them, because they'll say a comfortable man like you, with a big place, all your own some day, and lots of money, ought to have looked a lot higher than a penniless girl."

"What's money?"

"Nought if you've got enough—everything if you haven't."

"They'll very soon love you as well as I do—not that, no—but so well as one woman can love another."

"I hope so. I love your mother already—because she is your mother. But women don't like me very much—only my cousin, Betsy."

"They're jealous, I reckon."

"Do your folk know you're courting?"

"They do; because I'm a sort of man that can't hide himself, and if there's anything on my mind, other people find it out. But they don't know who it is, that I'll swear."

Gilyan reflected. Her mind dwelt not on women, but men.

"Then I'll ask you to keep it a secret for a minute longer. For a reason you shall know. But I'll keep the reason secret too—only for a little. Then you'll hear about it, and have a good laugh, I shouldn't wonder."

"Your word's law; but I can't hold it in very long, I promise you. And I can't go without you very long neither. There's no good reason why we shouldn't be married any time."

She laughed and looked with very genuine affection into his flushed face.

"You dear, precious man! Oh, I'm so happy, Warner. I'm feared of my life I shall wake up presently and find I've been dreaming."

"This is no dream," he said, kissing her again and drawing her close to him with both hands.

"It's life, Gilyan—the beginning of things—what youth and boyhood and the long years past was all leading up to—like the long lane climbs the hill till it gets to the light and air at the top."

"Why! That's poetry."

"Come," he said. "I must walk—I must step out and feel myself strong and alive. Never was I so much alive before."

He was going; but she stopped him.

"We must do what's vitty," she murmured. "Put our letters together here, please—if you can find a place for them."

He laughed and produced a pencil.

"Lord!" he said, "what a shaking creature I was when I stuck that in my pocket two hours agone. Two hours! Surely 'tis a month of Sundays since I left the Lands, my head in a maze of hope and fear."

"More hope than fear, I reckon."

"Not till I said I was coming here, and waited to see if you'd agree. That was the awfullest moment in my life, and the awfullest that ever will be in it. But when you didn't order me walk somewhere else—then—then I did buck up, for I very well knew you'd not let me take you there unless—unless you was prepared to consider it."

"That's the worst of living alongside the Windmill," said Gilyan. "A girl knows what's coming afore it comes, and a thrill be lost."

She was jealous to lose no thrills. Instinct made her avid for all the world had to offer.

They searched for a spot and presently she found one under the sill of the vanished window. There, not without emotion, Warner carefully drew the conventional heart and set within it "W. T. L." and "G. N."

"What's the 'T' for?" asked Gilyan.

"'Trecarrow.' That's my mother's maiden name. She's Cornish."

The girl considered.

"I'm not too sure if I don't like 'Trecarrow' better than 'Warner,'" she said.

"Too much of a mouthful."

"But prettier."

"You don't want a pretty name for your husband. Nothing pretty about me."

"You're strong, and you've got a dear, beautiful face," she declared.

They kissed again and then emerged in the fading dusk and slowly descended the hill. Gilyan once more impressed upon her betrothed that their engagement must continue a secret for a little while. She repeated that her reason was good and that he should presently be informed of it.

"Nought to do with anybody else, I hope?" he asked, and she laughed and pressed his arm, within which her own reposed.

"Very much to do with somebody else—with two somebody else for that matter."

"Men or women?"

"Men—and both known to you!"

"You're going to be one for mysteries, I see," he said, but not as though the thought amused him. She was quick to note this and felt perturbed.

"Don't you say that, my dear man; it hurts me and it's a long way short of true. There'll be no mysteries between us so far as I'm concerned. I love you a deal too well to trouble you with any such things, and for that matter I hate mysteries. This is only a bit of fun and I wish you could share it."

"Why not? I hope we shall share many a bit of fun in the time to come."

"I love fun and pleasure—far better than work I love them."

"The harder we work, the more we enjoy our fun when it comes."

The girl felt a shadow pass over her. This was the sort of platitude from which she fled, urged so to do by every instinct in her nature. People who said such things never said them twice to her if she could help it. But, in the silence that now fell between them, Gilyan told herself that she must take the rough with the smooth. A prosperous and successful husband of high character, blameless record and the son of a father like himself, would naturally make remarks of this sort. A time might come when she could stop his mouth; but for the present obviously he must say what he pleased. None the less, Gilyan did take the trouble, even in that great hour, to differ from him.

"I'll shock you, I expect, but there's nothing like truth. Work never makes me want to play: it only makes me want to cry. Of course there's some work I'd love to do—anything you might wish when I come to Orchard Lands—but for God's love don't ask me to look after the ducks and chickens, Warner. I hate 'em."

"Lucy's the one for our poultry. You shall do just whatever you please—so much or so little as you're a mind to. I shall be your work, I reckon."

"That's all the work I want," she said, "and that won't be work, but the joyful delight of every waking thought."

They parted where they had met, though Warner much desired to see Gilyan home.

"No, no," she said. "Gran'mother will be all eyes behind the parlour blind. She'll expect for a man to see me back, and she'll be disappointed."

"You won't tell her?"

"Not for a bit—perhaps next Sunday we will—or the Sunday after that."

He kissed her again and she returned his caress very heartily.

"I'm a proud woman and a rare happy one," she said, "how proud and how happy you'll never guess."

CHAPTER III

THE 'CHURCH HOUSE'

Cottages clustered around the church of Higher Marldon, where a tower and wings embattled made the place of worship look like a bristling hen protecting her brood. The village climbed a slope and its grey stone and white-washed cottages basked in the eye of a noonday sun. Higher Marldon stood within a great embouchure of the land, at the crown of a winding valley—a jewel on the lip of the cup of the hills; and beneath it coppice, meadow and fallow wound away northward to Lower Marldon in the vale a mile distant.

The 'Church House' Inn, at Higher Marldon, rose under the shadow of the red church tower. It was a house of entertainment worthy of its name, for Paul Neck stood on the side of law and order, and though a man of baffling opinions—the pride of some and the despair of other thinkers—none could affirm of him that he was not a good and honourable person, a faithful friend and a patient and long-suffering landlord. Matthew Fawden, the head man at Orchard Lands, entertained liveliest admiration for Paul Neck, yet differed from his opinions on every possible subject. He explained this anomaly in the following manner:

"If you do what Neck says," he declared, "you'll mighty soon be in a parlous plight; but if you do what he does, then you be safe in this world and a certainty in the next. His opinions are a scandal, and his actions a shining light."

In the bar of the 'Church House' half a dozen persons were assembled, on the Monday that followed Gilyan's adventure at the Windmill. She was one of them, for she had come to eat her dinner with her uncle and cousin; while others of the company included Paul himself behind his bar; his ancient, but still energetic potman, Weston Bulley, and his daughter, Betsy Neck. She was five years older than her cousin, Gilyan, and had not much in common with the beauty; yet Gilyan exercised a sort of fascination for brown Betsy. The younger had charmed her and become a considerable factor in her life's interest. She declared that she felt like a mother to Gilyan, and though she confessed that she was not in her cousin's confidences, nevertheless believed that she knew more about Gilyan, and even exercised greater influence over her, than anybody else. And this was true, for old Jennifer's grand-daughter loved Betsy and held her the only woman friend that she possessed. If Betsy's attitude was that of a mother, then Gilyan behaved much as a wayward daughter might. She told Betsy such of her experiences as she cared to impart and had more than once taken advice from the elder, which proved valuable.

Betsy was handsome also, and many marriageable men admired her stalwart and steadfast nature, dark eyes, firm mouth and generous disposition. She was like her father—fair-minded and patient—a very reasonable woman for one both good looking and popular. Indeed her only display of unreason perhaps appeared in a resolute championing of Gilyan against every disappointed man's tongue, or detracting woman's temper. She made excuses for her cousin, extolled her loveliness, stoutly maintained that one so exceedingly fair saw mankind at a disadvantage, being deceived by the male attitude invariably assumed before paramount beauty.

"To listen to my daughter about Gilyan, be like hearing an ant stand up for an idle butterfly," said Paul Neck.

He was a widower of ten years' bereavement, and some suspected he would marry again—a widow of Lower Marldon—Sarah Woodley by name—while others believed their friendship affirmed on narrower bounds.

The time was three in the afternoon and Gilyan had just prepared to depart homewards, when two men entered the bar and she delayed. They both came from Orchard Lands in the vale below.

Matthew Fawden entered first.

"Afternoon, souls," he said. "Be the cooper from Paignton over yet? Us ordained to meet here."

"Charles Stannon haven't come yet, Matt."

"Ah, well, not a very punctual man. But 'tis no odds."

"James, too, I see," added Mr. Neck, as a second man followed Mr. Fawden.

Gilyan also eyed the new comer with interest. He was a tall man—lean and long-faced, with a small head, inquiring eyes and a brow already permanently wrinkled by the mysteries of existence. James Woodley displayed little brown whiskers and a nose with a high bridge. He was thirty-five years old and he spent most of his leisure time with his widowed mother. He had worked at Orchard Lands all his life, as his father before him. He professed deeply religious convictions and highest principles. He had long loved Gilyan obstinately and prayerfully; and he believed that his petition would be answered sooner or later. He felt that by his manner of life and conduct, he deserved a reward, and that in God's good time the reward would be Gilyan.

"I've brought up our iron-grey plough-horse to be shod," said James, "and I'll have a glass of beer, Mr. Neck, if you please."

"So you shall, James; and how's your mother?"

"Quite herself, I believe."

"A masterpiece that woman," declared Paul, who never hesitated openly to praise the widow. "She looks on life in a very high-minded way, and nothing puts her about and nothing daunts her."

But James was not for the moment interested in his mother. He had turned to Gilyan and spoke to her in an undertone.

Neck and Fawden entered on one of their interminable discussions.

"A chap was saying in here a bit ago that it was a short mile to Lower Marldon, Matt, and I up and told him there weren't no such thing as a short mile. He said there was, and I said there was not. And what do you say?"

The orchard man considered.

"You be right as usual, Paul. You can't have a short mile, no more than you can have a long yard. For why? Because a mile's a mile, and anything short of a mile ban't a mile, and anything more than a yard ban't a yard."

"Just what father told the chap," said Betsy.

Mr. Neck chuckled.

"That's the value of a clear mind, Matt. You and me ain't the sort to lose ourselves in mouth speech; and if other people had so nice an understanding of words as us, there wouldn't be so many mistakes made."

"Words beat their makers without a doubt," admitted Mr. Fawden. "They ain't built honest very often, for such a lot of 'em mean different things; and how be you going to make your meaning clear with double-faced words like that? Every word did ought to mean one thing only in my opinion, and I wouldn't have no truck with any other sort."

But Mr. Neck held this a small matter.

"I heard a clever thing in my bar not a week ago throwing light on words," he said. "Two gentlemen was having a bit of bread and cheese here, on their way down to Compton Castle, and they sat at that table and I heard 'em telling politics. And one, he said that language be the everlasting bar to friendship and understanding between the nations. 'The Tower of Babel lies at the root of our miseries,' he told t'other, or words to that purpose; and then he went on to say as no one language can be turned into another, and that until treaties and covenants are made in tongue exactly understood by both sides, there's bound to be trouble. And a lot more like that.''

Matthew nodded.

''The Tower of Babel is a very good word,'' he answered, ''and no doubt all these different tongues was put in the world to punish it for that wicked job. And the punishment is worse than the crime to my thinking. But us ought to see the danger and try to make all foreigners learn English afore it is too late. There's no doubt that English be the best language yet invented to make your meaning clear in.''

''Why not Irish, Mr. Fawden?'' asked the potman—a little, old, grey, ratlike fellow.

''No, Bulley. There's no market for Irish in a troubled world. Irish be one of the languages better left to die in peace, even though your mother was an Irish woman,'' answered Neck; and as he did so the cooper from Paignton arrived and the party broke up.

Gilyan and James Woodley left the 'Church House' together, and presently she walked beside him homeward, while he led the newly shod horse.

He began to make love in his slow and humble fashion and she listened and waited her opportunity. It was her custom never to be short, or scornful, with any man who offered affection. She liked to hear them and measure the worth of their protestations, albeit the business usually followed one line of thought, and promised the same lifelong adoration. Some, better off than others, hinted at their prospects and powers; but James Woodley was not one of these. He knew that Gilyan understood his position and was aware that he owned the good house in Lower Marldon where his mother dwelt. If he ever boasted to her about anything, it was his life-long reputation for virtue and the absolute trust that his master placed in him.

He touched this now.

"I went into the bank with fifty-eight pounds, thirteen shillings last week," he said. "It's a fine thing to feel the large trust Warner Lidstone has in me. The trust of your fellow creatures is better than rubies, Gilyan, and when I come courting you, I always feel that I can boast what is more than accomplishments, or expectations even, and that is the world-wide trust I've won in all my dealings."

"So it is then, Jimmy. You've got every reason to be proud of yourself I'm sure."

"No, I don't say that. I might be proud of myself, but I leave that for others. I wish I thought you could feel proud of me, and I dare say if you had a personal interest in me, such as I offer to you, then you might become proud of me. But love is different. Yet you've never said you don't love me, nor yet that you feel it's beyond you. And so I watch and pray. I ain't one of them wilful men that dashes at a fine woman, because, in my opinion, that's contrary to religion and be the result of the lust of the eye. But I do think that you've got the makings of a very nice character under your looks and——"

"You'd say I was a pretty girl, however?"

"Certainly you are. To my eye you're so pretty as any picture ever I saw; and that's to the good; but if you were ugly as sin, I should still feel all I do, because it's built on your good heart and cheerful nature. 'Tis the working of opposites, because I'm a serious man and my mother's a serious woman; but if you was to come among us and marry me, then you'd bring good cheer and singing into the house and lift up our hearts."

"Why for did that old beast, Fawden, at Orchard Lands call me 'Cheat-the-Boys'?" she asked.

"Matthew? Well, there it is. He did, and I withstood him, and so did Arthur Partridge. Matt's an old bachelor with little milk of human kindness in him for the young; but his bark is worse than his bite. It's along of a disposition that don't see much to admire in women, and always be very jealous to keep them in their place. He thinks you're too fond of men in a general way of speaking, and he minds a chap here and there you turned down—no fault of yours of course; for why the mischief should you pick up with any good-for-nought just because he asks you to? And that's why I still hope to wed you, Gilyan, because with me you'd have a strong tower of defence against all the lightness and vanity, not to say godlessness, of the young men. If you was to take Arthur Partridge now—of course I know he stands among the possible ones—if you was to take him, you'd find there weren't no tower of defence there. Good looks I grant, and a very sharp sense of what he owes himself and what he thinks other people owe him; but to say it well within Christian charity, Arthur haven't got God, and he ban't within sight of his Maker so far. Though nearer thirty than twenty."

"You don't like Arthur?"

"I wouldn't say that. I'm so built that I find it very hard to dislike anybody built in the Creator's image. Arthur has his points, but religion ban't one of them; and if that's left out of a man, through his own stiff-necked fault, then of course you can't be sure of your ground. Character mustn't be counted on in a man who never goes to church nor yet says his prayers; and I'm powerful sorry to tell you Arthur don't do either."

"How d'you know he doesn't say his prayers?" asked the girl.

"Because we share the same chamber to Orchard Lands. A room over the big stable, with a chicket window facing out to the hill. And so, if Arthur was to seek, where alone we can hope to find, and go on his knees morning and evening, same as I do, I should know it. But in a word, nothing of the sort happens."

"Does he snore of a night?"

"He does not, to my knowledge."

“Does he make fun of you for saying your prayers?”

Mr. Woodley sniffed.

“If Partridge dared to do that, ’twould be once only,” he answered. “I’m a lot bigger man at Orchard Lands than ever Arthur can hope to be, and an insult such as that would go to headquarters very quick and he’d be cast out.”

Gilyan nodded.

“I’m sure it’s the last thing he’d ever dream of doing,” she declared.

“Then why for did you ax me if he did?” inquired James.

They had now descended to the cottage where Mrs. Woodley dwelt.

“If you’ll hold the hoss half a minute, I’ll fetch in this here bottle that Paul be sending to mother,” he said. “I won’t bide a moment.”

Gilyan took the halter and James, entering a little gate arched by a close-cut cupressus, disappeared.

Gilyan waited patiently, spoke to a few passers-by, and then cheered up at the sight of a male. Accident had served her well and she was rewarded for the present enterprise.

Arthur Partridge, who now stopped, stared, and showed considerable vexation at the spectacle of Gilyan holding Mr. Woodley’s plough-horse, was a clean-shaven and determined-looking man of five or six and twenty. He had dark, curly hair and a pugnacious and obstinate countenance, but he was undoubtedly handsome, with features clean-cut, well modelled, and well set together. Rather deep-set grey eyes he owned, a good, strong nose and a firm mouth with fine lips. He stood about the same height as Gilyan herself and was heavily built and strong upon his sturdy legs.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked. “Since when have you sunk to holding horses for Jim Woodley?”

“Only a friendly act, Arthur,” she answered mildly in her delicious voice, with eyes beyond him, to see who might be coming. "Jimmy's gone in to give his mother a gift from Mr. Neck, and we've just come down the hill together; and he won't be a minute, so I'm waiting for him."

Arthur had courted Gilyan for a year and was still hopeful. Indeed he judged that he stood the best chance of securing the maiden by virtue of his good looks. He believed that they suited one another well, and that he appreciated and understood her in a way denied to the lesser wits of his rivals. But he was growing impatient and the situation that he had now surprised filled him with astonishment. That there were other wooers unknown to him, he did not doubt, but that Gilyan could really think twice of James Woodley had never occurred to Partridge. Nobody knew Woodley better than he did. They lived together and worked together; and Arthur had nothing to affirm against James as a man; but the thought of this elderly and sober person as winning even a passing smile from Gilyan had never seriously occupied his mind. She professed and practised open love of pleasure and every sort of gaiety within her reach, and Partridge guessed that, in time to come, he might be called to preach greater self-restraint, and indicate that life was more real and earnest than the maiden imagined; but he was young himself and loved a revel and relaxation as well as she. They were not likely to lose the opportunities for happiness that might offer, whereas James—so Arthur considered—was old even for his age. Indeed when Woodley declared himself to be no more than five and thirty, the younger doubted it. James was always serious, if not actually sombre. He observed religious exercises, seldom spared leisure for a revel and could be, under certain conditions, funereal in his philosophy and most pessimistic in his survey of human life—its many disabilities and few compensations.

That such a man should be honoured by Gilyan's consideration seemed a proposition too fantastic to waste time upon; yet Arthur knew that his fellow worker stood among those who steadfastly courted her, and the fact that the fair object now appeared before him, humbly doing the will of James, awakened immediate annoyance.

Gilyan, who perceived it, was about to utter words well calculated to soothe Mr. Partridge, when he, with his usual impetuosity, forestalled her and made her way still more easy. Indeed, he said the thing she would have wished him to say—a thing he had often enough said before, and to which she now found a new answer ready—a reply to astound him.

He stared at her impatiently for a moment, then plunged into the familiar complaint.

"Why the devil can't you say 'yes' and be done with it? I'm sick of waiting, and you know very well I'm the one—you know it. What's the sense of wriggling and twisting month after month? It only makes me damned miserable, and it can't give you no honest pleasure, seeing you do care a lot about me. I've seen that much in your eyes a score of times, because your eyes don't tell fibs, whatever your lips do. Very well you know you'll come to the Windmill with me some day; and very well I know it. Then why all this senseless fret, as if you were a wench that didn't know her own mind?"

"I do know my own mind," answered Gilyan calmly, "and whether you know it or not, I can't say. But as for the Windmill—I'm nor feared of the Windmill any more than I'm feared of young Mr. Parsloe, who grows the turnips up there. If you're so blamed anxious to have a walk to the Windmill, Arthur—I'll come."

Mr. Partridge stared with genuine amazement. Here was a staggering announcement indeed, quite the last that he had expected for all his confident assurances.

"God in Heaven, Gilyan Neck, d'you know what you're saying?" he asked, his eyes glittering and his chin stuck forward.

"Yes, I do then. It's plain English, ain't it? I'll meet you up over at one o'clock Thursday—if you mind to."

"'Mind to'? But Parsloe's pulling his turnips there."

"I know all about Sam Parsloe. He goes home-along to his dinner every day a quarter before one," said Gilyan calmly.

"You mean it?"

"I do; and I'll ask you not to whisper a word to any other person."

"More I will—more I will. Oh, my dear creature——"

At this moment Mr. Woodley loomed through the dusk under the cupressus arch; and without another word Arthur went on his way. He left Gilyan a little flustered at her own audacity, and James marked her excitement, though he did not observe his vanishing colleague in the evening gloom.

"Sorry I was so long. Mother's a bit under the weather, because her maiden's failed her and be giving notice. That's the third in six months. Mother will preach manners to 'em and the toads don't like it. And she says the time be coming when we shan't find ten civil persons left in both the Marldons put together. Manners be a dead art in my mother's opinion."

But Gilyan was smiling to herself and paying no heed to Mr. Woodley. He caught her expression now, as they went on their way together past the scattered dwellings of the hamlet. The houses ran upon the east side of the road, here in a row, here separately, and behind them towered elm trees, while before them, on the opposite side of the road, climbed the highlands again.

"What's the luck?" asked James curiously. "You look so pleased as if you'd found sixpence."

"A shilling I shouldn't wonder," she answered, and the horseman ventured on a word of love.

"I'd give a brave lot to see you a thought more inclined to me, Gilyan," he said. "'Tis a very unrestful state you've thrown me in. Not that it comes between me and my duty—I wouldn't let anything do that—but it do come between me and my rest, and I often wake and lose half an hour of sleep thinking on it. And sleep is life to me; so you may say, in a way, that you be cutting away my very years by hanging off. I only ax you one question, and that is 'where will you do better'? I'm not a gawk, nor yet a know-nought fool, who might make you ashamed of him and his children in the time to come. I've got a mind and prospects and health; and as to my character, thank God, I'm not called to touch that. You can see my character on my face, as my mother often says. I've got what's growing terrible rare, Gilyan, and that's a religious cast of face."

"You have," she said. "There's no doubt about it that you're a lot out of the common, Jimmy. But you might ask yourself the same question you put to me. Perhaps you could do better if you looked around. I'm terrible poor, and the willows and the water-cress and the old house won't be worth much when I get them."

"I've thought of all that," he said. "There's a lot more to Withy Lease than your grandmother knows, or Frog Fawden either. They Fawdens are a pair of 'em—far too well pleased with the past to think it can be mended. I promise you great things so far as Withy Lease be concerned. However, that's in the future, and God knows I wouldn't shorten the life of Jennifer Purchase by one hour. One hears dark things of her early days, and she can't have too long to repent by all accounts."

"Terrible strange to think how that old, wrinkled, withered woman, with scarce a hair on her head and eyes gone dim and voice all cracked, once made the men go silly."

"Strange no doubt to you, but I know more'n one ancient man that risked his soul in that quarter before you and me were born."

Gilyan changed the subject.

"How would it be if we were to take a walk?"

"It would be very nice indeed," he answered, "and you've but to name the time and place and, if 'tis in reason, I'll be there afore you."

"I'll meet you in the dinner hour on Thursday at—at the Windmill, shall we say?"

James drew up and the grey horse stood still simultaneously. Mr. Woodley could not believe that he had heard aright.

"Where?" he said. "Did you say 'the Windmill,' or have I got cotton wool in my ears?"

"I shan't marry a man who wears cotton wool in his ears," answered Gilyan. "The Windmill is what I said. Why not? Yes, or no?"

"Yes—yes—but—good Powers—surely 'tis the man's place—I——"

"Till Thursday dinner hour then—good night—and not a word to a soul. 'Tis candle-teening* and I must run home," she said all in a breath; and then she was gone. She hastened forward so swiftly that, before James and his horse were moving again, the girl had vanished. Indeed he made no attempt to start for five minutes, but stood with his legs apart staring into the gloaming and breathing heavily. This was her way of confessing that he had won her! He felt amazement and immense satisfaction that this tremendous thing had really happened; he also experienced a sense of moral uneasiness—not on his own account, but Gilyan's.

"The Lord's doing no doubt," reflected Mr. Woodley, "otherwise you might call it a thought forward in her. I never heard tell of the maid axing the man to go there. 'Tis contrary to nature and might put the male in a very ugly position if he didn't want to go."

Then he banished all doubtful speculations and permitted himself to gloat on the situation. He was not a man who ever won any attention, and this achievement would lead a good many people to take him more seriously. That was to the good. He would now leave Orchard Lands and reside with his mother and wife at his cottage, while, of course, continuing to work as horseman with the Lidstones.

**Candle-teening.* Time for candle-lighting.

The grey horse turned patient and inquiring eyes upon Mr. Woodley and uttered a gentle snort of protest. The great creature was hungry and had a sense that there could be no good reason for standing in the middle of the road with a solitary man. The horse wanted his beans and knew that they were due.

"Windmill Thursday in the dinner hour—well, well—what a world!" summed up James. Then he went forward, opened a gate on his right presently and climbed aloft through a legion of apple trees now naked, with white-washed trunks glimmering through the murky twilight like a regiment of ghosts. Beyond them towered the bulk of Orchard Lands farmhouse. Yellow light glimmered in some of the windows. A man descended from the dwelling and Warner Lidstone passed down through the trees.

"That you, Jimmy?"

"Yes, master."

"Hoss all right?"

"Yes; Coomstock shod him himself."

"Ploughing tomorrow then."

James took the grey horse to its stable. He gradually grew more calm, but his intelligence was not built to receive this tremendous event without jolting from the rut. He already reflected so deeply what he should wear during the dinner hour on Thursday, that he forgot the grey horse's beans. The great creature ate the hay drawn down for him, and in his equine soul was a dumb, dim disappointment at something surely due, but withheld.

CHAPTER IV

ORCHARD LANDS

The business of cider-making is a vanishing industry and as the demand for this ancient drink wanes amongst us, the old orchards sink into neglect. In many districts may be seen more ruined veterans from the olden times than maiden trees to take their places. The ancients spread their gnarled limbs upon the earth and still salute Spring with leaves and blossoms, but their harvests have lost bulk and splendour; they often represent no more than the vanished and shrunken memorial of old apples long since driven out of cultivation by later and finer fruits. Orchard Lands, however, manifested no sign of the familiar conditions. Henry Lidstone, Warner's father, had maintained to his dying day that good cider would never cease to command hearty recognition, and he always argued that the indifference of the rising generation to this precious drink arose from its own deterioration. He had lived with the apple trees all his life, and so had Mrs. Lidstone; and now that her husband was gone, she remained a repository of cider lore—one learned in the matter of fruits and blends, and the right proportion of sweet and sour that go to perfection.

Matthew Fawden was her right hand and shared her knowledge, while Warner, though at the back of his mind lurked a will to plant corn, where now in the valley apples grew, obeyed his mother in all things and had no cause to grumble at the result. The orchards rolled round the homestead, reached the heights above it and the vale beneath, then extended again beyond the roadway and climbed to gentler elevations on the other side. Young trees took the place of old ones and never an autumn passed without generous plantings. The aged trees disappeared in winter fires upon the hearth; their places in the green grass of the orchards were occupied by the best and most prolific apples from England and from Jersey and Guernsey. There were new American apples also, in positions worthy of their beauty and generous yield. Mrs. Lidstone had hesitated long before this innovation, for she loved the old apples and felt a distrust of "The Sea Eagles" and "Wolf Rivers" from the United States; but they very swiftly won her heart and responded to her culture.

Orchard Lands was a big, straggling farmhouse planted on a plateau in the midst of the trees. Its white face and grey roof splashed with yellow lichens rose above them, and the place had been in the family of the Lidstones for a century.

Now Mary and her son and daughter were finishing breakfast, and Matthew Fawden, with Arthur Partridge, James Woodley and a boy, had just risen to depart.

Warner's mother waited till they were gone and then spoke to him.

"Nothing wrong?" she asked. "I always know when there's anything on your mind, my dear, such an open mind it is—at any rate to me. But if there's any points fretting you——"

Mary Lidstone was a solid, broad-built woman with a large and restful countenance whereon emotion seldom displayed itself. Her reserve could never be called cold or chilling. It contained no such quality, but rather sprang from a natural and life-long instinct of restraint. She was sympathetic at heart. Her own successful life had not made her narrow-minded or self-centred, and she felt no disappointment to see her son and daughter develop after the ingenuous and frank pattern of her dead husband rather than herself. He, too, was potent in their bodies, for Mrs. Lidstone had been a dark woman, of Celtic extraction, though now her hair was turned to greyness. But her eyebrows were still black, her complexion of a mellow and healthy brown, while her son and daughter had both fair skins, especially Lucy Lidstone—a bright and cheerful maiden without good looks, yet possessing the attractions of a pretty figure and a kindly soul.

"Something on my mind there is," admitted Warner, "and very much I'd like to get it off; but it's got to stop there a bit longer yet—not because I want for it to, but because I'm so commanded. But not bad news—quite the contrary, I'm sure—in fact, not to put too fine a point upon it, mother, the best news ever I heard. And mighty glad I shall be to tell it again, because my good be yours as we all know."

"Everybody's good is mother's," said Lucy; and then, as her simple brother went out, she turned to Mrs. Lidstone, in a sparkle of excitement.

"She's took him!" she said, looking round at the door whence Warner had disappeared.

Her mother nodded.

"Yes—that's it."

Mary stood quite still, looking before her through the window. She saw a bank of red earth through the stems of the apple trees and there, in the morning sunshine, shone the white and amber bodies of fifty fowls, moving and brightly flashing together.

"Oh, mother, are you glad? To think that Warner should get her after all her——"

Lucy was going to say 'adventures,' but already felt the word disloyal. Warner was very dear to her, and since the suspected possibility now confronted them as a fact accomplished, she felt that the future attitude to Gilyan Neck must admit of no shadow or qualification. Perhaps the same idea entered Mrs. Lidstone's mind; but her round, placid face showed no excitement; her brown eyes looked into the past, and she strove to see good in the event.

"Her mother was a nice, sweet woman," she said, "and Gilyan's like her, I hope. All's well then, Lucy. We must feel that all is going to be well, and we must keep our mouths shut till the accepted time and pretend we know nought before they're pleased to blaze it out."

"Why should she want him to wait? That's her wish, not his. I'm sure that Warner would like to go and shout it through the Marldons."

"There's a joy in secrets," answered Mary. "The young get a lot of pleasure out of 'em. 'Tis only when you come to middle age you hate 'em. She won't keep him long, for she must know he ain't built to hold such things."

"Whatever will her grandmother do?"

"She'll make shift."

Lucy reflected.

"I did always so hope it would have been Betsy Neck," she murmured; "and so did you, mother."

"I did," confessed Mrs. Lidstone placidly, "but what mothers hope are just the things that least often happen. We can keep that hid inside us, Lucy, and make the chosen one welcome."

"It's a bit of a lesson not to say hard things of anybody," confessed Mary Lidstone's daughter, "for you never know when your words may not be brought up against you and make you look silly. I've said that Gilyan was a frivolous sort of fool, but luckily I only said it to Betsy, and she's larger-minded than me, because she argued that the girl was very young and a bowerly creature longing for happiness and no vice in her."

"Gilyan and Betsy have always been thick as thieves," explained Mrs. Lidstone, "and Betsy has been a very good influence on her."

"Yet, if there is a man on earth that Betsy really admires, it's Warner. She'll never marry now, mother."

"A good wife, her. I'm always sorry to see the valuable women passed over. She's got plenty of time, whether or no, and now she finds that Warner has chosen her cousin, very like she'll pay more heed to one or two that do want her."

But Lucy shook her head.

"Never. 'Twas him, or nobody. I always saw that. And Warner's a silly creature to do this. He's thrown away one in a thousand."

"You mustn't say that, Lucy. Warner's not a silly creature. You know as well as me, that without pride in our own, we can say Warner's a very sensible, practical sort of man."

"But love makes 'em all daft for the time being."

"Granted in a way. And granted that many sharp and sensible chaps have chosen wrong and had no luck with their wives; but, on the other hand, scores of unlikely matches have turned out well enough. We must feel certain sure it's going to be a success, and we must do our level best to help make it so."

"Of course, mother. Don't think I'm against Gilyan; you might just as well be against a song bird, or a bunch of lilac."

"If she loves Warner with all her heart, it's enough," declared Mary Lidstone, "because perfect love casts out a lot of things beside fear."

"And all this time Warner thinks we don't know," laughed Lucy.

"We don't," declared her mother. "We couldn't swear it. We may be mistook."

"You wouldn't break your heart if we was, would you?"

A postman came up the path that led to the front door. It was a broad red brick way between box borders, behind which, under fruit trees, grew flowers.

Lucy went for the letters and evinced some mild excitement before the handwriting upon one of them. There were three—all for her mother.

"Read that first. It's from Harold, I do believe," said the girl.

"Yes, nobody writes such fine copper-plate as Harold. Though we don't often see it. What's he like to want?"

"Something for sure," laughed Lucy. "You don't catch Harold writing for friendship only."

She turned her eyes to the mantel-shelf whereon stood a photograph of her cousin. It showed a good-looking young man evidently not ignorant of his own advantages. His hair was parted in the middle, his moustaches were waxed to sharp points; his collar was of the tallest.

Mrs. Lidstone read the letter aloud.

"My Dear Aunt Mary:

"You will be sorry to hear I have been queer again and find myself a good bit run down along with another attack of the 'flue.' I am all right, but feeling very cheap, and you might whisper to Lucy that a pound of Devonshire cream would not be a bad idea. This is to know if you can do with me for a month or so later on. I shan't be myself again until I have had a breath of my native air, and you remember that Orchard Lands acts like a tonic on me every time. It is a good few years since I saw you all and I should very much like to come down—say in April, for quite a spell. I hope you keep very fit, and Lucy and Warner. Why doesn't he come up to London and have a look round? I can put him up and give him some fun.

"Business is pretty middling, and since the duty on cigars has come down, I'm doing a bit more with high-class stuff. Snuff looks to be coming in again. I remember poor Uncle Henry had no objection to a pinch of the best sometimes; but I suppose it's no good bringing you any! And, of course, Lucy would rather die than smoke a cigarette. But perhaps I shall be able to tempt her. When is she going to find a husband? But I expect all she will answer is to know when I'm going to take a wife. Well, I suppose the time has arrived. Perhaps I shall find 'Mrs. Right' at the Marldons. She is got to be West Country anyway.

"Believe me,

"Your affectionate nephew,

"HAROLD LIDSTONE."

Mrs. Lidstone handed the letter to her daughter, who answered all communications, and saved the elder what was to her an arduous business.

"Tell him he's welcome when he pleases to come," she said. "How long is it since he was here?"

Lucy made a calculation.

" 'Twas the spring of Matthew's great illness," she said—"five years. He'll be over thirty—thirty-four or thirty-five, I reckon."

"I thought at one time he was going to offer for you," declared Mrs. Lidstone; but Lucy shook her head.

"We're not suited. We like each other so much that we should never love each other. I always felt Harold was a brother to me—a brother that called for a lot of coddling. I couldn't marry a delicate man, anyway."

"Some women like 'em," said Mary Lidstone. "Just as some men fall in love with a pinnickin, sickly girl, just for the pleasure of fussing over her and playing nurse, so a hearty woman will often wed a starveling sort of man."

"Weakly creatures didn't ought to marry," declared Lucy, "and yet they're the sort that fly to marriage—for support and comfort, no doubt."

"It is so," granted her mother. "Them with no nature in 'em crave for something to hold to. 'Tis a comfort for the weak ones; but it don't work too well in the next generation."

She turned to Matthew Fawden, who had just entered.

"And what had cooper got to say yesterday?" she asked.

"Pretty much what I wanted to hear," answered Mary's right hand. "He tried it on, of course; but, as a man of business, that was to be expected of him. However, we got on firm ground damn soon when I said you was rather in a mind to try Tibbetts for half a score of large casks this year. 'Tis wonderful what you can do with Tibbetts. His very name puts the fear of God into t'others, because well they know that once a cider-maker goes to Tibbetts, they never leave him no more."

CHAPTER V

GILYAN ENJOYS HERSELF

It was an inspiration very typical of young Gilyan to repay those who had bored and bullied her, as she now set out to do. Examined, her intention would have been found to include no malice, but rather a light-hearted joy in reducing unfavoured but obstinate suitors to impotence. Her cruelty was not that of a kitten, for she very well knew what she was doing and understood that the meeting in prospect offered no hope of pleasure either for James Woodley, or Arthur Partridge; but she had planned this stroke in the same hour that she accepted Lidstone, and when conscience faintly pricked, she had an answer ready. "If that pair of fools don't see the joke, they ought to," thought Gilyan. Farther than that she did not consider her entertainment from the standpoint of Arthur, or Jimmy. They had been a very great nuisance for a very long time—so she assured herself now—and they were both fair game.

Gilyan was at the Windmill ten minutes before the appointed hour. She had indeed watched Mr. Parsloe pulling his turnips from behind the hedge, and taken the centre of the stage at once as soon as he was gone to dinner. Now she stood at the shattered entrance of the old tower and, perhaps for the first time, probed beneath the surface of the trick she was about to play. Was it that the glory of her recent triumph had unsettled her a little? Did these two devout but tedious men really deserve such a disillusion? She doubted a little now and even suffered active disquiet when suddenly an unexpected thing happened. For suddenly, over the ridge beneath her upon the field path from

Lower Marldon, appeared, not one—but two hats, beneath which bobbed two energetic and unfriendly heads. She had already found time to wonder whether the cap of the horseman, or the wide-awake of the orchard man would first appear, and yet the probability that Arthur and Jimmy would meet upon the way had not struck her. For a moment she was amused, but quickly perceived that the approaching men had found no matter for laughter.

"I must hope for the best," reflected Gilyan, and indeed she had done this steadily through all her brief years. Arthur's head bobbed fiercely and abruptly, while Woodley's swayed on his long neck with deprecating curves.

"Like a gipsy-rose in the corn," thought Gilyan. Partridge wore working clothes, but James Woodley had found time to make some changes in his apparel. He wore a pair of russet leggings and a mustard yellow tie with purple stars scattered generously upon it.

They arrived together, heated and inflamed; indeed they still wrangled while they stood at her side, and Jimmy appeared almost in a mood for tears, while Arthur allowed himself the foulest language that he knew. She eyed them with fearful delight and listened.

Then in a lull between the thunder of Partridge and drone of James, Gilyan took a high hand.

"When you've done cussing each other, perhaps you'll behave," she said, reaping advantage from the emotional crisis between them.

"'Behave!'" shouted Arthur. "Be us here to l'arn how to behave from you? What do you mean—what are you playing at, woman?"

He mopped his face and panted, while Woodley indicated the gravity of the situation.

"Here's a fearful come-along-of-it, Gilyan," he said, "and you'd best to make your meaning clear afore this hatch-mouthed, man-handling chap gets on to me. We may be gawks, or we may be witty men. That's as God pleases;

but we very well know 'tis contrary to nature that you can have bid us both up here. And for that matter it ought to have been contrary to your virgin state and ladylike ways to bid either. 'Twas the man's part, not yourn."

"That's right," admitted Arthur; "but since you commanded me, I be come; and he says you commanded him likewise, so he be come. And which heard right you'd best to say. An' damn quick, too. This loose-bellied fool thinks you called him, and I tell him he's a liar, and I'll thank you to do the same."

"Lie in your face!" cried Jimmy. "I know plain English when I hear it, don't I? Be what I may, I ain't deaf, though your bull's voice be enough to make me."

"Sit down on the grass," said Gilyan, "and don't be a pair of zanies. I think quite well of you both, though you are a terrible tiresome, obstinate pair; but it was to spare future trouble I had you both up here—see?"

"What's the good of both, you mad creature?" asked Arthur. "What d'you make of us? And who ever heard of a self-respecting woman daring to name the Windmill to a man anyway? You've been brought up in a Christian land and you know very well what the Windmill means; and how be I going to offer for you and say what's in my mind afore that monkey-faced fool? And well you know if he dared to say a word afore me, I'd smash in his mouth."

"Don't you fear, you wretch," retorted Woodley. "I ain't going to speak to the mistaken woman till she sends you about your business."

"Do list to me," begged Gilyan, but neither was in a mood to attend her.

"Maids come here to listen to men, not jabber themselves till they be invited," answered Arthur, "and you've bitched it all up now, whether or no, because, after a masterpiece of stupidity like this, I ban't in no temper to make love or play about with you. It's in a nutshell. If you'll be my missis, well and good, without no more love-making. If that's what you mean, say so, and I'll kick this slack-twisted man down the hill; and if you ban't going to say so, then perhaps you'll tell me why the blazing hell I'm up here."

The fates were kind and Partridge in all ignorance had opened an admirable way to Gilyan's revelation.

"That's right," she said cheerfully. "I'm going to be your missis, Arthur. That's why for I bade you come."

"Then perhaps you'll throw a light on what you said to me, Gilyan Neck," cried Woodley, his voice rising shrill as the wind. "Can such things happen? If he's the man, then——"

"Wait—wait, Jimmy. I'm going to be your missis too!" she declared.

James was stricken into silence, while his colleague poured blistering but pardonable expletives.

"How the——? What the——? Be there bats in your belfry, or is the devil got in you, you giglot idiot?" he shouted.

"If you be gone daft, Gilyan, us had better lead you down the hill to your grandmother and let the past bury the past," murmured Jimmy.

" 'Tis you be daft and can't see no farther than the points of your silly noses!" she answered. "Come here—come here, the pair of 'e, and I'll show you something. You've heard naught but the truth from me, and if you weren't a couple of jolter-heads, you'd have guessed it. You deserved this for hunting me as if I was a rabbit all these months; and now I'm upsides with 'e!"

She hurried into the hollow cup of the Windmill and showed them the encircled letters under the empty window-hole.

"There!" she said, " 'W. T. L. and G. N.' Stare at that and take it in if you can. Now you know."

"Master!" moaned Mr. Woodley. He stared with haggard eyes, not at Gilyan, but at the orchard man.

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Stockton, Calif.

"And now you can wish me joy," said the girl cheerfully. "And when I come to reign at Orchard Lands, Arthur, I'll be a lot more civil to you than you have been to me."

" 'Civil,' you baggage!" he shouted. "Hear what I say afore you're set over me. You're nought yet and I tell you this: I won't be despised by a little empty beast like you. Any man would sooner be hated than despised, and I hope you'll hate me as much as I hate you in future; but despise me you shall not!"

Gilyan fluttered with secret joy at the storm. Partridge looked most striking and she admired his handsome, furious face.

"Nobody could despise you, Arthur," she cooed. "I'm sure you're terrible well thought upon for sense and cleverness, and good looks also; and I wouldn't think of hating you, and when I come to Orchard Lands, I hope you won't hate me. Nor yet James. I'm sure you're both much too clever not to laugh at a bit of fun."

"Fun be no name for it, Miss Neck," said Woodley with shaking head. "Me and Partridge know when to laugh in season as well as any other men; but there's nothing whatever to laugh at in a young, respectable woman trying to come it over us like this. Us ban't the sort of people for a she to trample on, and a decent, self-respecting girl would have known it; and though no doubt you think you have made me and Arthur look very foolish, I tell you this—the only foolish one among us be you yourself! And if you tell this tale and let the people know you kindiddled me and Arthur up here in the dinner hour with a lie, then nobody won't think a penny the better of you for it. So now then!"

"That's right and so true as gospel," declared Partridge, for in common misfortune the men now made common cause and forgot their hard words. "What Woodley says is what I say: and I say more; and if I was to tell master how you've served two of his best chaps, it wouldn't do you no good—that I will swear."

Gilyan luxuriated in these threats.

"There," she said, "you make me tremble like a leaf, Arthur! Now I must go, because Sam Parsloe will be backalong in a minute. And I'm sure you don't want for Mr. Lidstone to throw me over. That would be a terrible revenge. I'll make it up to both of you come presently. Warner knows what fine men you be."

"Yes, he do," answered Partridge, "and he've had me and James under his orders a good bit longer than he've had you; and if he marries you, he'll live to regret it, same as we have lived to regret offering for you."

" 'Tis a merciful escape for me and Arthur that you won't take us, and I don't care who hears me say so—not now," added Woodley.

"I hope I'll live to teach you better, Jimmy," she murmured.

"Never you won't, because you be bad-natured," explained Partridge. "After today me and James will treat you as the future wife of our master did ought to be treated, because we know our place—a thing you never will know—but now, as equals for the last time, I say you be a born devil, not worth the shoon on your feet, and no use in the world for any honest purpose. And Woodley says the same."

" 'Tis a far-reaching thing to say, but you brought it on yourself, and I do say it—though for the last time. 'Cheat-the-Boys' you are and will be—married or single—unless the Lord chastens you afore it is too late," declared James with due solemnity.

Then the men went away together and Gilyan's face relaxed into exquisite smiles. She watched them go and gave them a start, for she was bound in the same direction. Solely for this little entertainment she had begged her future husband to keep their engagement secret until she bade him speak; but now the interlude was ended. She determined to appear at Orchard Lands immediately and delight Warner Lidstone by suffering him to tell his family the great news.

She considered the fulminations of Arthur and Jimmy without emotion. Their sense that a gulf was henceforth fixed between her and them, she appreciated, and loving a jest, their final attitude to her, before the new relation should be established, also amused her very much. But it was more the attitude than the admonition that entertained Gilyan. Indeed, she grew a little indignant when she considered the exact view that Mr. Partridge had expressed and James seconded. To be called a born devil, not worth the shoes on her feet, and useless to the world for any honest purpose—that was severer language than even Gilyan had heard, though it was not the first time she had listened to hard words from a man.

"I'll make it up to the poor toads," she said to herself. "They're all right. 'Twas cruel funny how they got so friendly with one another again the minute after they knew the game was up."

She chirruped and laughed to herself, dawdled upon the hill-top, found the first white violet in a sunny hedge, put the stalk in her mouth, and having chatted amiably with Mr. Parsloe, who now returned, presently sauntered down the hill and into Orchard Lands.

She avoided James where, having discarded his yellow leggings and new tie, he laboured in the farmyard, and approached the porch of the house-place. It happened that Mrs. Lidstone herself saw the girl as she came up the passage way from the kitchen. It was of blue limestone, worn into undulations by generations of human feet.

Mary guessed that the time had come.

"Hullo, my dear," she said, hiding her heart and looking at the lovely face flushed with the breeze of the hilltops. "And what can we do for you? Your granny's well, I hope?"

"Granny's very well, thank you, Mrs. Lidstone. And—and—might Mr. Warner be home?"

"He will be in ten minutes if not sooner. He never misses his tea. Come in and take a cup along with us."

"May I?"

"Very welcome, be sure."

Another woman might have revealed her knowledge, but Mary was jealous not to do so. She had enough imagination to know that Warner's pending revelation would fall very flat if he discovered that it was no surprise.

Presently he appeared and did not conceal his astonishment before the spectacle of Gilyan at the tea-table. He whispered a word to her and begged to learn if the secret might now be told. She nodded, her eyes on her plate and Warner spoke.

"Maybe it'll be a staggerer for you and Lucy, mother; but I'm the luckiest man ever, and Gilyan here has promised to be my wife. You'll say we were a pair of deep rascals to keep it hid so close, but that was her will, not mine. She wanted to get used to the great idea a bit before other people were let in the secret; and she's been wondering what you and Lucy will say; and I've been telling her you'll welcome her like a daughter and a sister. And well I know you will."

"Brave news to be sure!" said Mary, "and so I will be a new mother to you, child, if you're pleased to let me."

"And I'll be a sister to you," promised Lucy. She left her place and kissed Gilyan, and then Gilyan herself got up and walked to Mrs. Lidstone.

" 'Tis all too wonderful for anything," she said, taking the elder's hand, "and I thank you greatly for making me so welcome. And I'm sure that I'll do all that is in me to be a good daughter to you, Mrs. Lidstone, and a good wife to Warner.''

''I'm sure you will,'' answered Mary. ''To think you be coming to anchor here!''

''I can't believe it myself yet. And I'm none too sure Warner isn't making a mistake. But all the same I'll try to prove he isn't. He's a dear, good man—a lot too good for me.''

Then Warner spoke and the three younger ones chatted gaily while the mother smiled and listened. She was a woman skilled to read character. She watched Gilyan and dwelt on the intonation of her voice. Her little sentences were inexpressively attractive with their break and purr; but Mary was occupied with something deeper than mannerisms. She looked into Gilyan's eyes and she did not find what she desired to find reflected in them.

As dusk came down and the meal was ended, Warner showed a desire to take his future wife away, and perceiving this she rose and declared that she must be walking homeward.

''Does your grandmother know?'' asked Mrs. Lidstone, and Gilyan replied that she knew part, but not all.

''She's found out I'm tokened; but she don't know yet who it is. I'll tell her tonight. She'll praise God I expect.''

''Let me come and tell her along with you,'' declared Warner. ''And we'll listen to the holne-screech* in the elms. He's back where he built last year, and he's singing fine of an evening.''

Gilyan took her leave, very well pleased at the reception accorded her by her future husband's relations. She had devoted herself entirely to them and rather ignored Warner during the progress of the visit. She felt gratified at the things she had heard, grateful to those who had made her so welcome. A mood that Mrs. Lidstone had not seen appeared when the girl was alone with her sweetheart again. She became very quiet and for a moment almost tearful.

**Holne-screech.* Missel-thrush.

"They are good to me," she said. "What a mother to have!"

"She's yours now too, my dinky dear."

But Gilyan shook her head.

"She'll never like me—not when she gets to know me, Warner."

"You've got to make her," he answered. "You've heard her. None could have got a better welcome."

"For your sake that was. I'll tell you another thing. They only pretended to be astonished when you told them. They'd found out. I saw it in your mother's face when she met me at the porch."

They descended where huge elms, with grey evening in their boughs, dwarfed the little houses beneath them. In summer they threw cool, massive shadows that only dawn and sunset evaded. The hamlet sinking upon a windless dusk, was cool, dewy, embowered in its cradle of orchard and uplifting meadow and tilth. It sprawled like a lusty infant on the unctuous breast of its mother, for the valley was a place of milk and honey, deep pastures and sweet fruits. The missel-thrush sat aloft in the last flicker of light, where it touched the finials of the elms, as though the inflorescence yet to come already foamed there. His wild music fell on their ears and they stopped to listen.

Elsewhere Lucy and her mother talked together.

"She's like a beautiful flower, but have she got a heart?" asked the girl doubtfully.

"A heart—yes. But where is it? I know where it isn't, I'm afraid. She's more like her aunt than her mother. Her aunt was a pretty woman—quite so pretty as Gilyan. A proper, lovely love-hunter was Nelly Purchase. Came home to her mother at Withy Lease to die, and flirted on the edge of the grave. But Gilyan's mother was a very good girl. They both had a consumptive look to 'em—those sisters. Along of living in that wet hollow in childhood I suppose; and their father died of it afore 'em—and their brothers. Poor old Jennifer's had a cruel time."

"Gilyan's all right."

"Yes, she's all right—a very fine creature and sound as a bell. There's only one thing wrong with her, so far as I'm concerned; she don't love Warner—not yet, anyway."

CHAPTER VI

COMMENTS

Opposite the neat house where James Woodley's mother dwelt, there rose a noble sweep of grassland towering to the crest of the hither hill. It swept in splendid curves across the west and its undulations suggested the modelling of vanished waters in pre-historic time. The green hill ascended to a lofty sky-line and rolled vastly out, its bosom unbroken save for a few solitary trees. This parklike expanse meant a great deal to Sarah Woodley, the mother of James. She was a Church of England woman, yet permitted herself ideas not strictly orthodox in some directions, and her deep regard for Mr. Paul Neck had rendered her large-minded, albeit she did not go as far as the innkeeper. Indeed, she held some of his opinions perilous and hoped that she might live to see him change them. But the monotonous grasslands over against her dwelling had been a feature of Mrs. Woodley's married life. For forty years she had looked out upon them, and now, at sixty-five, declared the vision most sustaining, if not actually essential to her happiness and peace of mind.

"I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help," quoted Mrs. Woodley; and she had even hinted sometimes that if Paul Neck asked her to marry him, which was an event regarded as probable, it might prove beyond her power to leave the comfort of the uplifted pastures.

It was a rule with Sarah Woodley and James, when Sunday came, to attend evening worship together at Higher Marldon, and only the roughest weather deterred them. Service ended, another unvarying rite succeeded it, and mother and son called at the 'Church House,' partook of a cordial and enjoyed speech with Mr. Neck and Betsy before returning home. Sometimes they stayed for supper.

And now, as they ascended the lane from Lower Marldon and bell music drifted down the valley, James told his tragic news to his mother. He had reserved it until this moment, and the time chosen for imparting particulars of his reverse at the Windmill was not happy, because her indignation slowed Mrs. Woodley's footsteps and reduced her to breathlessness just when the hill demanded her best powers. She was a big woman and weighed twelve stone. But she was strong and sound; she had lived a well-ordered and restrained life of work and plain faring; and she possessed a stronger character and larger understanding than her son.

"I've had it out with Gilyan Neck, mother," said Jimmy suddenly. "Or rather it might be more fitting to say she's had it out with me. I kept the news in that quarter hid from you, hoping it was going to be good, for the creature axed me in plain words to meet her at the Windmill a few days backalong; and of course I thought I knew what that meant."

"Axed you!" cried Mrs. Woodley. "My patience! What will the young women do next? Then she's took you, and you never told me—oh, James!"

She stood quite still and the heavy necklace of jet beads rattled on her massive bosom. Her prayer-book fell from her hand and James picked it up and cleansed it of a spot of mud before returning it to her.

"Not at all," he answered, and proceeded to a minute description of the events upon the hill-top. "And Arthur Partridge be in two minds if he'll stop at Orchard Lands when she takes Lidstone," he concluded; "but for my part, being older and more large-minded than Arthur, I shall go on as usual and accept the blow from whence it comes."

"And you can do more," panted Sarah. "You can thank your watchful Lord and Master—I mean Christ, not Mr. Lidstone—for saving you alive. I'm properly angry for the insult, James; but I'm properly thankful, too. You've escaped a fearful danger and you well know that I never was favourable to Gilyan. A thing of her age don't get the name Matt Fawden gave her for nothing. She's born to the undoing of men, and you be the very fashion of man she'd have undone so quick as a collar button. And I'm only sorry for Mary Lidstone and her son, because him that marries Gilyan Neck is asking for it."

"There were the letters—so plain as need be," declared James; "and not more than two, or it might be two and a half, hours after the calamity, she walked strambang into Orchard Lands, as if the place belonged to her!"

"To think she's snared that man, and him with such a far-sighted mother! A black day for the family, and it won't never come to no good, look at it as you please. The Purchase blood never did come to no good—never. A wilful, short-lived lot, and always so poor as coots. But your escape have got its bright side for me and I'm sure I shall thank God with a pretty good appetite in church tonight, James."

"We shall be late, however," said her son.

"I can't help that. Nobody could travel very quick after hearing such a bit of news," declared Sarah.

Indeed she proceeded slowly and the service had begun before they arrived. Nor did Sarah on this occasion win much benefit from her devotions. She was glad when the rite ended and she was able to enter the 'Church House' Inn and hear Paul Neck.

She always left her stimulant to him, and sometimes he decreed a glass of port, sometimes a liqueur or brandy; while on very cold nights, he added to the spirit hot water, sugar and lemon.

"Here you are, punctual as the moon, Sarah," said Mr. Neck, "and what light was thrown on life tonight? I will say of our parson that he's a practical fashion of man.

There be warmth in his views. He don't strive to show off his own cleverness, like some of 'em."

"He was on to the subject of marriage," said James, as he lit his pipe. "A very curious thing that his reverence should start on marriage, Paul Neck, because that was the very subject in our minds—me and mother."

"I shouldn't wonder if he was uneasy on that theme," declared the publican, preparing a beverage, while Mrs. Woodley sat by the bar-parlour fire. "There's a great change coming over the outlook on marriage and even the parsons begin to feel a doubt if marriages are made in heaven, like they used to be. Marriage is like most other human contrivances: it don't stand still, and the meat of one generation be the poison of the next. In a word, marriage have got to be tackled and tinkered—and the Church don't like it."

"People go too much to the registry office and have forgot that marriage be a holy dispensation, so parson said," explained James.

"That's how he would look at it," admitted Paul; "but that's just how the rising generation don't. Change is in the air, and when people decide to wed but not to breed, as such a lot do now-a-days, then all the safe-guards and conditions lose their weight. Them that decide to go the whole hog together can always ask the Church to smile upon their endeavours; but if they ban't going to have childer, then the case is altered and they may choose to love in freedom and part without a pang or a mess, when the love wears out."

"And what about their own damnation?" asked Mrs. Woodley. "But there," she added, "I needn't ask you that, because you're always against hell and on the side of change."

"I am," confessed Paul, handing her a glass of punch; "and for a man of my age, it's a good bit to my credit to be for changes. And you know it is, Sarah, and you wouldn't have me different. Change keeps the air sweet and also the mind. And change be cooling hell same as it be cooling a lot of other places.''

''But what about God, who knows no shadow of changing?'' asked James. ''Got you there, Paul! If you love your Maker, as you must do, then you oughtn't to hold out for change—eh, mother?''

''I'm always very unwilling, Jimmy, to unfold my opinions about God Almighty,'' said Paul, ''because I don't like hurting people's feelings and there's no more delicate subject. And no two people that ever come into this bar have got the same idea of what God is. That's the amazing thing. 'Tis like socialism, and the proper way to shoot high pheasants: no two people in the world are exactly agreed on the right of these difficult subjects.''

''God's taught us Himself, however,'' argued James.

''It's the Sabbath, Jimmy, and so perhaps a word can be spoke on the subject, though I'm always shy of it,'' answered the elder. ''There's a story I might have told you, or I might not, showing what my old father in his time thought of God. He gave me a little cantle of land in his garden, all for my own—five square yards I dare say—and I was to grow cabbages and roots, and my mother was to buy 'em off me if they were up to the mark. And in them days, at ten years old, I was a very good little lad indeed, being brought up by a most religious parent. In truth my mother over-did it and made me a bit queer, and it was over my garden patch that my father found out how deep religion had got into me. Because, after the ground was mine, I went out and knelt down in the middle of it and thanked God for the gift and asked Him to bless it and make it yield the fruits of the earth after their seasons; and then my father called me and wanted to know what I was playing at. I told him it weren't no game and explained; and he said, 'Well, Paul, what you have got to do be this. You mustn't drag God into it yet awhile. First you'll cleanse off the weeds; then you'll trench two feet deep all over; then you'll dig in a barrow of stable manure, which you can gather off the roads yourself; and then you'll plant your seeds and dust 'em over with soot; then you'll watch the seedlings and fight for 'em against birds and vermin, and thin out in due season; and then you'll tend and water and watch and be quick to slay an enemy, and fight for the life of each young cabbage as if it was your own; and then—then, Paul, you can ask God to be on your side also. Work and watchin',' said my father, 'did ought to come first and prayer afterwards. First you've got to do your very best and cleverest, and then go afore God when your part be done. But there's a lot of people put all their strength into prayer, while they scamp the work, or else pay others to do what they should be doing; and the prayer of such people falls on a stone-deaf God in my opinion.' "

Betsy had just returned from church.

"That's just how grandfather used to talk," she said.

"But for my part," continued Paul Neck, "I've gone beyond that point. I know a good deal more about God than father did, because I was always more inquiring as to His ways. There's some parsons think you oughtn't to dwell over-much on the manners and customs of God, but will do better to look after your own; yet 'tis a free country and I never felt out of order in marking how things happen by the Everlasting Will."

"His ways are not our ways, Paul Neck," ventured James.

"They are not, my son—the least witty amongst us can see that with half an eye. And if you ask yourself how would it be if our ways was copied from His, the fearful answer is this: that the world couldn't go on."

James Woodley regarded Paul with round and shocked eyes. He felt alarmed at such sentiments, for he believed, with the majority, that Mr. Neck would some day offer to wed his mother.

" 'Tis blaspheemious," he said, "and might get you into trouble if it was heard."

Then Mrs. Woodley spoke.

"That's enough on that subject," she declared. "Tell me about this great news—your niece, Gilyan, and Warner Lidstone. Of course you knew all about it, Betsy—her being your dear friend; and I tell Jimmy, who doted on the girl, that he's well out of it. And you can't say he is not."

"I don't, Mrs. Woodley," answered the innkeeper's daughter. "Gilyan wouldn't have suited James, and he wouldn't have suited her. And she did tell me her secret; but it's a secret no longer. I'm going down the hill this minute—to supper at Orchard Lands, and 'tis time I started."

"You're daft about her, Betsy, and always was. But I say she's a very hard-hearted and empty-headed creature; and good looks don't make amends for bad qualities."

"You're too hard on her, Mrs. Woodley."

"Not at all," declared James. "What have she done to me, d'you think—and to Arthur Partridge?"

Betsy laughed, but not unkindly.

"Too bad that was, and I told her so; but you know her well enough to know she must be joking. It wasn't meant wickedly. You've got to take some jokes in this world, Jimmy, along with the other knocks."

"What's a joke and what is not depends mostly on the point of view, Betsy," declared Mrs. Woodley. "James is right—'twas a very indecent, outrageous act to lure him and Partridge up there; and it's no use your standing up for Gilyan, fond as you may be of her, because you've only got to ask yourself one question and you'll find the answer all against her. Would you have done that to a man, let alone two?"

"Of course she wouldn't," answered Paul for his daughter. "In fact, I don't know any maiden that would have done it, barring that saucy piece. And now she's going to marry the apple man."

"Folly always gets served worse than wickedness," answered Sarah Woodley. "The Lord answers a fool according to his folly, but I'm very sorry for Warner Lidstone and for his mother also."

"Nothing like responsibility for taming the wildest heart and the hottest head, Sarah. I don't say 'twas a very clever thing of Lidstone to knuckle under to the lovely toad, and he may live to repent it as you foretell; but there's always hope with a woman, and finding herself a wife, with a mother-in-law like Mary Lidstone, may be the saving of Gilyan."

But Sarah shook her head.

"I don't think it. 'Tis the husband that makes or mars, not the mother-in-law. I wish Warner Lidstone had more chin and less forehead—that's what I wish. The man to bring that woman to heel wants to be a bit harder in the grain than he is. She needs discipline, and if she'd been whipped sharp and often in her childhood there might be more hope."

"Marriage is a whip in itself," declared Paul—"to the young I mean," he added. "To the middle-aged it is a comfort and consolation; to the very old it may be a prop and staff; but for a maiden plunging in like Gilyan, there's bound to be surprises and I hope she'll rise worthy of the great adventure."

"She will," promised Betsy. "She's thoughtless but never bad—only terrible fond of anything that makes for laughter."

"Laughter to her may be yowling for somebody else—and generally is," declared James. "But the end of that will be weeping and gnashing of teeth for somebody, and if fair play is done, it will be her turn next."

"Don't you be revengeful, James," pleaded Betsy; then several men entered the bar and Mrs. Woodley declared that they must go.

She, James and Betsy set off and discussed the situation without ceasing, until they reached the home of the Woodleys. There Betsy left them and hastened forward to Orchard Lands, where the supper party awaited her.

Mary Lidstone took the head of the table, while Warner and Gilyan sat upon her left hand and old Jennifer Purchase upon her right. Lucy came next and beside her sat Mr. Mark Fawden from Withy Lease, while his twin brother, Matthew, head cider-man under Mrs. Lidstone, followed at the foot of the table and Betsy sat beside him. The twins much resembled each other. They regarded themselves as the equals of those for whom they worked. Both old bachelors were bald and bent and grey-whiskered, with stooping shoulders, fearless, pale-blue eyes and round, red faces. But their expressions differed, as did their attitudes to life. Matthew, the snugger man, was a pessimist and took gloomy views; while Mark, albeit Withy Lease offered hard work and poor return for it, enjoyed a more sanguine outlook and displayed a larger charity. He was called 'Frog' by reason of his amphibious life, spent half in the mire and half on dry land. He declared himself immune from Marldon's common grief: rheumatism, and ascribed his good health to eating apples, of which he daily partook when they were to be had; while cider for the balance of the year saved the situation. Cider such as his brother brewed, Mark held a panacea; but he did suffer occasionally from an ailment which he called 'Marsh Fever.' When this overcame him, he went to bed and stopped there until he felt himself recovered. At such times Gilyan and her grandmother administered to 'Frog' and he drank copious glasses of Winter's bark. His doctor begged him to substitute quinine, as a more potent and valuable drug, but he declined to believe it and held to the ancient remedy.

As for Matthew Fawden, he loved his brother, respected

Mrs. Lidstone and revered Paul Neck, but for the rest of the world felt neither affection nor esteem. The apple trees were his friends, and he declared them to be both better natured, larger-hearted and more honest than his fellow creatures. But even among the apple trees he made enemies. Certain shy bearers he hated, because their natures were grudging—trees that Mary Lidstone had told him plainly were worth the pains.

"Little and good's the motto of 'Cornish Gillyflower,' and you can't have it both ways, Matthew," she assured him, when he had grumbled that this famous fruit cumbered the earth.

"The pippins be just so sweet, and generous with it," he argued, but Mrs. Lidstone liked a 'Cornish Gillyflower' herself and would not have the trees away.

The supper party was merry, and Gilyan, a little shy and nervous, cheered up when Betsy arrived. Miss Neck amused them with tales of Gilyan's youth, when her dead mother used to bring her to church at Higher Marldon every Sunday.

"It ain't for want of asking that she don't go now," declared old Jennifer, scenting criticism. "I'm too far gone to climb to Higher Marldon, but Mark always goes and many is the time he has offered to take Gilyan."

"So I have then," declared Mark, "and I hope come she's married, you'll make her go, Mr. Warner."

"She used to go," said Betsy, "but she never would put her foot inside till her mother had let her walk under the tower and look up and see the queer monsters that peep down at you from the battlements. One's a pelican and another's a creature that might be anything; but Gilyan said it was a rabbit, and she'd pipe out, 'I 'on't go in afore I've seen my pelly and my bunny!' So her poor mother always had to wait till she'd took a look at 'em. Then she'd go in as good as gold."

"If she waits for Warner to take her to church, she'll wait a long time,'' said Matthew. ''He's not a church-goer.''

''What about you, Matt?''

''No more ain't I,'' confessed the cider-man. ''But I'd go if it was only nearer.''

''No, you wouldn't,'' declared Mark. ''Not you. You never did cotton to it, because father used to drive us there. 'I can be led, but I won't be drove,' you used to say when no more than a lad.''

''And that's Matthew today,'' said Mary Lidstone.

They chatted, ate and drank and laughed at the expense of Gilyan and Warner; but the girl had little to say. She was rather subdued and devoted herself to Mary Lidstone. She listened, observed, took in the way of things at Orchard Lands, perceived her sweetheart's significance in the scheme and the ready attention and reverence he displayed for his mother. It was clear, despite her gracious manners and good nature, her humour and easy way with them all, that Mrs. Lidstone was the reigning power, not her son. Gilyan would not be mistress of Orchard Lands any more than was Lucy. Nor had Warner the command of capital that she had assumed. He frankly confessed, on an occasion of a walk with her, that he cared not a button about money and was well contented to know that his mother and his mother's lawyer looked after that side of the farm.

''I only know mother saves every year of her life and, good seasons or bad, it's always a rule with her to put a little away.''

''And what about your expenses and needs?'' asked Gilyan; and he had explained that his requirements were modest.

''She gives me all I want and often makes me take a ten pound note I'm not particularly wanting,'' he told her; ''but now it's going to be on another footing. We shall draw our own money out of the business, and save a good bit too, I hope.''

The subject was delicate and Gilyan did not pursue it. But his attitude disappointed her. She had been brought up to count pennies, and hoped that after marriage with a prosperous man, this disagreeable and melancholy necessity would cease.

The talk was of apples and Matthew won the respectful attention he always commanded on that subject. He deplored the decay of ancient apple lore and described how in his early boyhood he remembered the business of christening the apple trees on Old Christmas Day.

"I can mind it, thanks to my wonnerful memory," he said, "how all the nation would throng out, with the maidens carrying cloam jugs of hot cider and the men bearing old fowling-pieces and the boys gathered likewise to sing the famous song. They'd blaze and bang away into the boughs overhead and pour cider at the bowls and sing, men and women together, so loud as they were able. And if there was a moon and snow chanced to be on the earth, the sight was very fine. A rare lot of fun went to it, and horse-play and love-making in the dark. And if the crop was the better for it, who shall say? Very like it was, for our forefathers had just so much sense as us, if not more, and they never wasted their time to no purpose."

"I saw it once, when I was a little one holding my father's hand," said Mrs. Lidstone. "A proper merry revel. There was a tree at my old home with mistletoe on it in them days, and I mind how next morning father laughed and said there'd been such a run on the trees, along of lovers, that the grass was beat down all around it."

Then she turned from apples to withy-wands, that Mark might have his say, for he also loved to talk.

He was hopeful.

"The mild winter have fetched 'em along." he said. "There's a very brave show promising."

"The pollards are like ugly, old giant's heads with yellow hair bristling out of them," murmured Gilyan.

Mrs. Lidstone approved the simile.

"A very clever thought," she said. "If you can get poetry out of the willows, what won't you get from the spring blooth in the orchard? Go on, Mark. Tell us about the willows."

Mark dwelt on the details of his craft and Jennifer supported him. Among the old woman's many fears, the thought that Mr. Fawden would weary of her modest industry and leave her, was not the least. She praised him tremulously now and declared that his knowledge of when to cut was a mystery shared by none.

" 'Tis an instinct," he said. "And I can't tell you how I do it more than Tom Widger, at the lime-kiln, knows to the hour when to draw. These things are gifts from God and only to be handed down through the blood, not by teaching. I've known a water-finder have a water-finding son; but no man could teach another how to find water, because it's like other things that are not to be taught. How do Mrs. Lidstone know exactly what the late spring frost be doing in the orchard? Know she does and she's never mistook; but she don't know how she knows, and she couldn't teach another to know."

Mrs. Lidstone nodded and Lucy confirmed Mark.

"Warner knows a mighty lot about apples, but not as much as mother," she said.

"And never will," added Matthew.

"There's some things only women know and men never can learn," admitted Mary. "They're just queer items of knowledge and prophesying and suchlike."

Jennifer agreed.

"We look ahead farther and see deeper," she ventured. "We're built to be more cautious about the future than them. And so we feel in our bones coming things that men don't grasp till they happen. Take death——"

"Now, granny, don't croak. This is a party," said Gilyan; but Matthew reprimanded her.

"Be quiet," he ordered, "and listen to Mrs. Purchase. No Christian creature did ought to mind hearing about death—party or no party."

"I was only going to say that we know death when we see it, long afore the doctors even. If a man or woman's going home, 'tis us that see death wrote on the face—not the men: men never believe nothing till it happens."

"And we know more yet," declared Mary Lidstone. "We read the heart in a way they cannot. We feel by instinct in a minute if people like us, or if they do not; but men—they never can tell. And we read character quicker than most men."

But neither Matthew nor Mark was prepared to grant that.

"Not you," vowed Matthew; "not you—not as a whole sex. You do, ma'am; because you've a gift that way, and you can figure up a man, or woman, pretty close to the truth every time; but don't you go to think women at large have got your cleverness. What they do is to judge people from one point of view: whether they be going to be any good to them, or not. And they may be devilish clever as to deciding that question, but they ain't no judges of character in the large. They haven't got enough character themselves most times to be judges of it in other people."

Mark gazed admiringly upon his brother.

"You go deep, Matt," he said.

"I believe you're talking nonsense, Mr. Fawden," declared Gilyan boldly. "I feel properly frightened to think you hate us women so bad."

"He don't really," said Lucy. "You must just face him same as I do. He only thinks there's one woman in the world, and that's mother. But his bark is worse than his bite, ain't it, Matthew?"

"'Twas a pretty sharp bite to call me 'Cheat-the-Boys,'" grumbled Gilyan. "But I'll make him sorry he said that, some day."

Mark laughed.

"You'll give Matt many a bad moment, I expect," he said, "but I can tell him behind the scenes that you've got a kind heart, Gilyan, even though it may be a few sizes too large. However, 'tis fixed firm at last, as we all know."

They drank long life and good health to the engaged couple presently, and Warner thanked them very heartily for their good wishes.

Then the party broke up; Mark and Jennifer Purchase went first, and, giving them ten minutes' start, the lovers followed, since Lidstone must see his sweetheart home. Then Betsy went on her way, and Lucy walked a mile with her. Betsy praised her cousin, while the other girl listened, heavy with doubt. She was much attached to Betsy, and felt it a sort of treason not to share her enthusiasm for her future sister-in-law; but that she could not do as yet. She had cherished a secret dream for Warner and presently she confessed to it.

"People always seem to me to belong to the seasons," said Betsy. "There's some are like the spring all their lives, and some like autumn, and some nothing but winterly. Matthew Fawden's a winter man—bracing, you might say—and your mother and my father belong to autumn. Never was another like Mrs. Lidstone, so sound and sweet—like ripe fruit warm from the sun. She's a wonder, Lucy. And father, though he's a man, have something of the same about him. And Gilyan's a bit of spring—not because she's young, but because she's like the flowers and singing birds and full of hope. The spring people are the hopeful ones, and the hopeful are the salt of the earth."

"And what am I?" asked Lucy.

"You and me are between spring and summer," decided Betsy. "But I don't know either. Take you all round, you're a spring girl."

"I don't feel much like spring for the minute, anyway," confessed Lucy. "I know 'tis treason to speak a word against Gilyan in your ear, but this I do think with all my wits: she isn't the best wife that Warner could have chose."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I'm positive sure of it."

"What does your mother think?"

"She thinks that Gilyan doesn't love Warner."

Betsy stood still before this shock.

"Oh, my dear life!" she murmured. "I'm terribly sorry to hear that. From anybody else it wouldn't have troubled me; but Mrs. Lidstone—if she could only have heard Gilyan telling about him to me."

"Mother judges a lot less by words than other things," answered Lucy. She was silent a moment, then burst out with her own baffled ambition for her brother.

"I wish to God he'd took you, Betsy; and so does mother."

The other girl laughed.

"And so do I," she said very frankly. "We're talking secrets now, but I don't mind telling you—what you know already, for that matter—that I'm fond of Warner. I admire his big nature—a man that is quick to think good of everybody and couldn't do nothing mean, or small, if you paid him to do it. I respect and admire him—who doesn't, for that matter?"

"And you're the same. Mother says you belong to the order of the women that are a jewel for a husband's ear."

"Not me. I can be so cattish as any girl sometimes. But we've got to take things as they happen and Gilyan's better known to me than anybody. There's a great deal that's really fine in her, and if she plays a bit for her own hand, why shouldn't she? Who don't? She's had a lot against her, Lucy. No mother since she was a child, and no schooling to name, and nobody in authority over her, and such looks as you don't often see. And they ain't only skin deep either. Given time and patience and a husband like Warner, and your mother to watch over her, she'll come out in a way to delight you. A lovely creature like her is handicapped a lot, remember. She never sees the truth same as everyday people. She's clever, too. She knows by instinct what the men like."

"Too well she knows it," declared Lucy. "She's diddled too many of 'em not to know."

"The fault was largely their own."

"Not that chap at Newton?"

"It was never fairly brought home to Gilyan, and I hope you'll not mention it," begged Betsy.

She talked on and presently they parted, Lucy striving to win consolation from the other's assurances, and Paul Neck's daughter firmly convinced that her championship was just.

CHAPTER VII

THE TOBACCONIST

Gilyan went on her joyous way without understanding the present, the future, or the past. She delighted in the attention her engagement challenged, and was exceedingly content. At such times she smiled upon her little world and let her happiness run over in kindly words, kindly thoughts and kindly deeds.

Two instincts dominated her: the one to postpone marriage and live under the present exciting circumstances as long as Warner would permit her to do so; and the other appeared in a dim premonition that all was not wholly right with her conscience. She knew that she did not love Warner Lidstone, but she cried down the small voice which rang this fact in her heart; she told the small voice that a time was coming when she would love Warner; she assured the small voice that she loved Warner better and better every day of her life. She demanded of herself to know what maiden could help loving a man so generous, so gentle under her wayward or wilful moods, so good-tempered and so honest. He came rich in every virtue that a sensible woman might be supposed to admire in a man. His character none could question; his position was eminently satisfactory; he was healthy, not bad looking; and he adored her. So far as money was concerned, it would rest with her to alter his values on that subject. All this she admitted, and knowing herself not devoid of sense, felt very certain that her present regard would swiftly ripen into real affection. "If every decent girl with proper opinions would rise to loving such a man the moment she found he loved her, then it's sure I shall do the same,'' thought Gilyan. Meantime she heard so many assurances that she was a lucky woman, that a human prompting to dwell upon what she brought to the bargain occupied her sometimes in secret. She was not vain; but she believed herself, apart from any consideration of good looks, to be clever and capable—a woman well able to do her part in married life and add to her husband's prosperity. Many men had told her so. She smarted a little to think the bargain was all on her side, and voiced this uneasiness to Betsy, who avowed that it was nonsense.

''Plenty will soon say Warner's a fortunate man,'' foretold Betsy, ''and plenty know it already.''

''You get fed up with having every Dick, Tom and Harry tell you that you've fallen on your feet and struck more luck than you deserve,'' grumbled Gilyan. But she was gloriously happy none the less, and if her mind sometimes entered into dark places by night and wondered dumbly whether life at Orchard Lands was an ideal destiny for her nature, doubt only endured for a little while and another dawn banished it.

Warner was already clamouring to be married at Easter, and Gilyan begging for an autumn wedding, when Harold Lidstone came in mid-March to Marldon and awoke for Gilyan that interest a strange man always awakened.

The visitor showed a different strain of blood from his relations. He was slightly built and a little lacking in virility. He looked refined and more highly bred than Warner and Lucy. He was handsome in a small-featured way; his face was delicately moulded; his brown eyes and curly black hair proved pleasing to many feminine critics. But the refinement and delicacy hardly extended beyond his appearance. He had a self-confident, though not self-assertive, manner and immense vitality despite a weak chest. Nor was his confidence offensive, for Harold proved too fond of a joke to create any serious opposition. His humour was genuine and his interest in his fellow creatures not assumed. He brought an urban atmosphere with him and a certainty of opinion, but gave himself no airs. He permitted his learning and experience to ooze from him without ostentation, and if he was asked a question he could not answer, confessed his ignorance. Thus he impressed the village, for he denied himself to none and indeed exhibited a very amiable and comprehensive friendliness. He was a tobacconist and had succeeded his father in business at Islington. Harold talked vaguely of being engaged to be married, but, at a later stage in his visit, explained the reason for this assertion and admitted that it was not true. For a time, however, he dwelt upon an illusive, though desperately attractive maiden, who dwelt at Hampstead and would at some doubtful future date reward his patience and devotion.

Harold Lidstone rejoiced in the country. He was now a man of five and thirty and had not visited the Marldons for many years. He declared himself as more than ever convinced that he ought to have been a farmer, assured Lucy that he was putting on weight daily and only regretted his physical inability to consume the cream and eggs and abundant good things that his aunt forced upon him.

Lucy much admired Harold and devoted a good deal of her time to his amusement. He praised Gilyan's beauty, but did not see much of her, for she had little time to bestow on anybody save her lover. He criticised her, however, and revealed himself in his aunt's eyes as a poor student of character; which fact surprised her in such a sagacious man. But it was not to Mary Lidstone that he uttered his opinion. Lucy heard it on the occasion of a long country walk with her cousin. Harold differed from most Londoners in his affection for walking; and now he spent half his time tramping the country side, extending his rambles as his physical strength increased.

They tramped on a windy March day among deep lanes, which sheltered them from the eastern breezes, and Lucy, who was no mean field botanist, described the wakening life of the hedges. The road, once an old pack-horse track, hammered through the surrounding fields by generations of horse's hooves, rose presently and the hedges grew low enough to reveal field and forest. Here were spinnies of larch and pine set cunningly in rotation by sportsmen long dead; here the orchards stretched under the grey curtains of the east wind; here lay meadow, fallow and remote planes of great woodland hidden in the haze. Mother-naked, stretched the red earth with ploughs crawling upon it. Behind the men and horses upland rook and sea-faring gull moving amiably together, exploring every furrow for grub and worm. On the elms, a fitful fan of light touched their inflorescence to a ruddiness as bright as the earth beneath. Their high tops were netted in a lace-work of tiny blossom that hung transparent colour veils upon their rounded heads.

But Lucy was occupied with the little things at her feet. She found in triumph a green hellebore; she plucked dogs' mercury and the apple-green spathes of wild arum; at a streamlet's brink, the golden saxifrage peeped for her and the dewy moschatel.

But Harold grumbled.

"I hate green flowers," he said. "It's not natural: green's the colour of the leaves."

"It must be natural," she argued, "else they wouldn't be here. They're only green to our eyes: the young bees understand 'em."

They argued this point and presently an early primrose gladdened the way, with purple violets and blue speedwells. Harold stopped at a shed on the crown of the hill, lighted his pipe and looked down upon the undulating vales beneath.

"That's Withy Lease—the green streak to the north, isn't it?" he asked.

"It is."

"A melancholy place to live in."

"Why?"

"Don't you think so? But then I hate wet like a cat. It wouldn't please me."

"A very dry house," declared Lucy. "Or so Mrs. Purchase always says. It didn't suit her family, though. She had sad fortune with them all. What do you think of Gilyan, Harold?"

"I think," he said, "that she's out and away the most lovely girl I've ever seen in my life, Lucy. I do indeed. Her beauty shines through her in my opinion. Some girls are lovely outside, and you feel there's nothing more to them—just creatures made for show; but Gilyan, so far as I can judge, has a lot more than that behind her. She's splendid and rather wise for a country girl. Where she got her wisdom I can't guess—from her father, no doubt. The Necks are pretty sensible."

Lucy was loyal—up to a point.

"I begin to like her, too, and I do think she's very clever and capable. As to wisdom—that's different."

"It's the right word, I assure you. A very far-seeing young woman, and knows her good fortune. She's one of the rare sort who feel gratitude, and she's very grateful to you all for the way you've welcomed her. She told me so."

"You think she's the right wife for Warner, then?"

Harold considered.

"I think this. I think she wouldn't marry where she didn't love: and I think that if she did love a man, he'd be the luckiest man on earth."

"That's a bit vague," she answered. "Mother—this is strictly private—doesn't feel too sure that Gilyan cares for Warner all she might."

The man was silent for a few moments. His cousin had not surprised him.

"She's young, and no doubt she felt a bit overwhelmed when Warner offered. But be sure she's honest as the light, Lucy. If she didn't feel in the bottom of her heart that she loved Warner as a wife ought to love a husband, then she wouldn't have taken him. I'm positive of that."

"I see," answered Warner's sister. "Perhaps that's why she wants to wait till autumn—to make sure. But oughtn't a girl make sure before she says 'yes,' not after?"

"A nice question, and on the face of it the answer is 'yes.' But you've got to allow for a lot of things. I wouldn't say she was wrong to keep on the safe side of marriage for a few months. That's wisdom, in my judgment."

"I'm not blaming her, only do it look like the perfect love and trust there ought to be?"

Harold thought that Gilyan's action might represent the highest form of love and a delicate consideration for Warner's ultimate happiness worthy of all respect. He made it clear that he entertained the highest admiration for Warner's future wife; indeed he repeated that to see her was a great experience.

"I've never known anybody like her," he said. "She's a wonder, and I do believe her character is as rare in quality as her looks; and I hope Aunt Mary will come to find that out—such a judge of character as her."

"You've never told us much about your sweetheart yet. Why didn't you bring her down with you?" asked Lucy.

But the tobacconist preferred not to explore that subject.

"The time isn't ripe," he said. "Of course I could weary your ears about her, and much I should like to do it. She's a very sensible woman, and she's got a bit of money and has no objection to the business; but the last word isn't spoken yet, Lucy. She's turning it over and I feel pretty sure that it will come right; but I shouldn't be justified in taking it for granted, you understand."

"Can't you even show us her photograph?"

He shook his head.

"You'll be the first to see it at Orchard Lands—when I get it,'' he promised. ''But what a place for fine girls Marldon seems to be! There's you, heart-whole still apparently, and there's Gilyan, and there's Betsy Neck. I had a bit of lunch at 'The Church House' yesterday, and never expect to see many nicer than her.''

Thus he chattered and then they turned homeward.

Lucy duly reported their conversation to her mother, who showed interest at hearing her nephew's opinions.

''There's more in Master Harold than he lets us see—same as there's more in Gilyan than she lets us see,'' said Mary. ''A very nicely mannered man and woman but—well—perhaps 'downy' is too strong a word. Of course a Londoner, like Harold, would have a bit up his sleeve: you'd expect it. He's got to be pretty sharp up there to hold his own for sure. But the quality I mean is something he shares with Gilyan herself. It's just what Warner hasn't got, and you haven't got, though 'tis common to most women wherever they're bred—town or country. It's the protective instinct in all of us; but it goes a bit beyond that in Gilyan. She loves secrets for themselves: she's got a secret nature. Now a man like Warner hates secrets, and if he had to keep one, it would irk him. You can judge of people in a way by whether they like secrets, or do not.''

''I believe Harold's got secrets. He's terrible secret about his intended for one thing,'' said Lucy.

''He is; but the answer to people's secrets is not to be inquisitive about 'em. If nobody don't want to know your secrets, then they very soon fall flat.''

A fortnight later Lucy remembered this conversation in connection with something very like an adventure. Harold never interfered with work and after he had left the house one morning for a ramble, Mary Lidstone asked her daughter to tramp over the hill to Shiphey, a neighbour hamlet, with a message, and the girl set off to do so.

Her way led across the height dominated by the Windmill, and emerging from a field into the lane upon which it opened, Lucy came face to face with Gilyan and Harold. Gilyan was smoking a cigarette, which instantly vanished into the hedge, but not before the other girl had seen it. The man was clearly perturbed, but his companion showed no embarrassment.

"Why, Lucy!" she exclaimed. "Who ever would have thought to see you up here?"

Lucy stared and instantly asked the first question in her mind.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Looking for Warner," answered Gilyan calmly.

"Funny place to look for him in working hours on a week-day!"

"Hounds meet up here, and I thought Warner would very like be up over."

"Hounds meet at Higher Marldon, not here; and when did you know Warner go to a meet of hounds, anyway?"

Lucy was uncompromising and very clearly annoyed. Then Harold began to talk, but she paid no attention to him, said not another word, and proceeded on her way as fast as she could walk. The culprits watched her out of sight without speaking. Then the man swore.

"Be damned!" he said. "I wouldn't have had that happen for a fortune."

"It has happened, so we've got to think a minute," said Gilyan. "She'll tell Warner, of course."

"Devil doubt her."

"Well, you'd better get back to Orchard Lands and tell him first."

"And you also," he said. "You come. This is a case where the truth will serve best. I'll say that we arranged to meet to see hounds, and that we met Lucy, who told us that they weren't coming that way. Then we came back together."

Gilyan debated as they walked.

"Warner won't think twice about it," she said. "Mrs. Lidstone will."

Their conversation showed considerable familiarity, and indeed they knew one another far better than anybody imagined. Harold Lidstone had been more than a month at Lower Marldon, and this was not his first stroll with Gilyan. Now she modified his plan and showed a glimpse of the wisdom Harold had already praised.

" 'Twill be best to make more of it," she said. "Lucy will make a lot of it, and if we have already made a lot of it before she gets home, the ground will be gone from under her. You see me back to Withy Lease—that's what you'd best to do; then you go to Warner and tell him I'm terrible put about and have been crying my eyes out because Lucy was sharp with me. Say that I asked you to come, because I thought that the hounds were to meet at the Windmill; and that I'm properly upset at the way Lucy took it and so on. You can do that; then Warner will come over to see me in a hurry; and you can leave the rest to me."

Then she dismissed the subject and Harold's alarm was allayed.

They were soon on dangerous ground again—the ground that both enjoyed to travel; but there was an under earnestness and reality about all they said, and each already guessed what lay in the heart of the other.

Harold, as his fright wore off, grew presently playful.

"I'm going to give you a name nobody else has," he said. "In private I shall call you 'Gilly.' "

This came as no novelty whatever to Gilyan; but she pretended that it was something new.

"Fancy you thinking of that!" she said.

He continued to be personal.

"Before I'd known you a week, I felt you were thrown away among all these apple trees," he declared. "You've got the style for a town. You don't walk like a country girl and don't dress like 'em—anyway you don't wear your dresses like 'em—and you don't talk and think like a country girl. If you were in London for a year, you'd be an amazing wonder."

"Such good things are not for me," she answered. "I've made my bed and I'm going to lie on it; and it will be comfortable whatever else it isn't."

He scorned such meek content.

"What d'you want with comfort at your age? You know better. Leave comfort to the has-beens. You've got your life before you and power is better than comfort. I tell you that a woman like you—after you've been polished up in London—there's nothing you couldn't do."

"I don't want to do anything particular but make Warner happy. But I'll own I'd like a shop better than a farm. More fun, I reckon."

"Yes, and more scope—a bigger thing in a way. A woman like you in a shop—specially a shop like mine for high-class tobacco and cigars and pipes—why, I dare say you'd double the business. But perhaps, if I had such a wife as you, I wouldn't let her go into the shop at all."

"Why not?"

"Jealous. I should always remember Matthew Fawden had called you 'Cheat-the-Boys.'"

"I never cheated any boy, or man either, though I may have cheated myself here and there."

"What do you mean by that, Gilly?"

"Why, I'm kind by nature and I've always felt terrible flattered and proud when anybody liked me. And I've never turned a chap down without giving him a fair trial, to be sure he weren't the right one. And then, after, when I found he was not, all the thanks I ever get for my mercy is to be told I was a hard-hearted little devil, keeping him on the hooks and torturing him, knowing all the while I never meant to take him."

"A chap tried to drown himself, didn't he?"

She laughed.

"There's another side to that. People don't try to drown themselves. If they mean it, they do drown themselves. He never meant to."

"You're a poor, down-trodden girl with enemies all round you," he chaffed.

"I hope not, Harold. I don't want to begin my married life with enemies—not in a little hole like Lower Marldon."

"No doubt you do feel it a little hole—a woman with such a power to fill a big space as you. It's too small for you anyway; and though I'm not saying a word against Warner—he's one of the best—this I do say, Gilly; he's too small, also—not in body, but in mind. If there's one thing about you that's clear, it's this. You're made of brains yourself, and if you can't have brains about you to appreciate you, you'll wilt and get moped. You're only a kid yet, but you've got a growing brain and good old Warner—well——"

"His mother's clever enough."

"I don't mean that sort of cleverness. You want to live before you begin to die. You want to see life and taste life. Irish stew and plum dough is all right—so's seed cake and cider; but you were made to taste finer things, if you understand me."

"Promise to ask me and Warner up to have a holiday in London when we're married," she said, "then you can invite me to taste the finer things you know about."

"I'm none too sure I could stand it."

She was silent a moment, and before they parted, fifty yards from Withy Lease, she was defending herself against gossip and declaring that she would be thankful to get married and off the tongues of the people.

"You'd think to hear some hateful creatures that I loved everybody," said Gilyan, and he was quick to sow a seed.

"No, you don't love everybody; and I'll tell you a thing more interesting still: you don't love anybody."

"That's very wicked of you," she declared. "Should I have taken Warner for keeps if I hadn't dearly loved him?"

"What's simpler? Not a shadow on you, Gilly; not a shadow on you. But you've only done what thousands of other nice, modest girls have done. You've seen a good fellow worthy of being loved, and just because you felt there was no reason why you shouldn't love him, you've come round to the mistaken opinion that you did. He loves you—granted, and in your humble way, along of inexperience, you're so pleased that such a fine chap should love you, that you honestly think he's woke love in you. There's not a shadow of blame and I'm not saying a word that you could feel angered with. I'm only saying that I've thought a mighty deal about this, because, of course, I never saw anything like you in my life: that goes without saying, though I am a Londoner and have seen plenty of lesser beauties in my time. And I tell you, on my word of honour and only out of respect for you and your future, that so far you don't love Warner. You may get to do so. It may grow and presently come to the real thing. But it hasn't so far, and at the bottom of your young heart, Gilly, you know it hasn't."

She looked up at him but did not answer; neither did he speak again.

"And now," she said, after a pause, "you'd best be getting back before Lucy does. You'll know what to say to Warner. Mention the cigarette, too—she saw it; and say it was your doing—not mine."

"Which is perfectly true," he declared.

They stood to part.

"Give me one for luck," he said.

She kissed him and he kissed her back, then was gone.

And Gilyan, returning pensively to her home, met a glowering grandmother at the gate.

"You're a hateful girl!" she cried. "I saw and I'm 'shamed of you!"

"Why? He's a relation—and—he knows how to kiss and Warner doesn't."

"Thank the Lord he doesn't, then. Lucky the wife who has to teach her husband that. That chap's town-bred. I know 'em and you'd better watch it. I'd hoped and prayed that you was going to be like your mother! and if you're going to be like me, then God help you."

"I'm very much upset," said Gilyan calmly, "very much upset indeed and I can't be worried no more, gran'. And when Warner comes, which he will do in an hour, you can tell him I'm on my bed crying my eyes out, and you don't know what has happened to me."

With that she left Jennifer staring and entered the house. She ascended to her room and put on a print gown.

When Warner, in deep concern, presently arrived, she descended to him, her face stained with tears.

CHAPTER VIII

CRISIS

There came a day when Harold Lidstone insisted on giving an entertainment. He hired a motor car and took his relations to Paignton, where he had ordered dinner on a generous scale. Afterwards he sought what amusement the sea-side town might offer, while tea and moving pictures completed the day.

As Gilyan foresaw, her lover had come quickly to Withy Lease after the unlucky meeting with Warner's sister, and with tears, not altogether unreal though correctly timed, she had succeeded in creating the necessary impression and discounting any statement that Lucy might subsequently feel called to make. It was not, however, to Warner but her mother that Miss Lidstone went. She had determined not to open the subject to him at all and felt no little surprise when he himself gave her Gilyan's explanations. Lucy, slow to think evil, and conscious that the incident might be explosive, declared regret at any acerbity she might have shown, but found herself heartily disliking both Gilyan and Harold—as much for their craft behind her back, as for the incident of their private meeting. To her mother alone she confided her emotions and Mrs. Lidstone pretended no great astonishment. She had a prevenient spirit, looked far ahead and already believed that a blow awaited Warner. While grieved beyond expression for the nature of his probable disappointment, Mary made no attempt to hide from her secret thoughts most genuine satisfaction.

"If that happens what I think may happen," she told

Matthew Fawden, "there's going to be sorrow for my son; but some sorrow have got to be suffered afore you can come through to content. Sorrow's often the only possible road to happiness, Matt. You understand."

He did.

"I only hope you may be prophesying the truth—for all our sakes," he answered. "Whether that town-bred nephew of yours could hold her in, I don't know; but I'll lay my life your son couldn't. He's too trusting. 'Tis a case for setting a thief to catch a thief with her."

"I wish 'em nothing but well," Mrs. Lidstone answered; "but if it pleased the Lord to make her run away with Harold Lidstone—some of us might sleep no worse and give thanks in secret."

"Why not in public?" he asked.

"It's hard to be hard on the young; and there's something terrible fascinating about her; but nobody's ever heard me say a hard word against her, Matt. Only the better I know the girl, the clearer I see that she was never meant for Warner."

They spoke on the day of the party to Paignton, where Harold and Warner, Lucy, Betsy and Gilyan, were gone; and elsewhere at their work, which brought them together, James Woodley and Arthur Partridge discussed the same problem. They had become reconciled in a common misfortune; but while James now accepted the situation and regarded Gilyan as future mistress of Orchard Lands, and therefore beyond any further criticism, Arthur hated her actively and was deeply interested by reason of some private investigations. He knew that Gilyan walked with Harold Lidstone, and he had seen what perhaps none else had seen—a moment when Warner met his sweetheart and spoke to her with sharpness. He longed to see Gilyan stricken and hear that Lidstone had changed his mind and cast her off. Arthur imparted this ambition to James, and James was alarmed at such animosity. He admitted, however, that Warner Lidstone had more to gain than lose by breaking his engagement.

"Not that he will do so," he declared. "He's not a changeable sort of man and love hides the truth of her, same as it did from us till she forgot herself so shameful. Not that I would lift a hand to save her, far from it; but she's a clever woman and she knows a lot more about Mr. Lidstone than we do."

"A lot more about both Lidstones than we do. She's got 'em both on a string, and I hope she'll drop ours and take the Londoner and get hell for her reward, which is what she deserves."

"I'd like to see the master escape myself," confessed Jimmy. "He's too fine for her."

"He is; and you'll look a long way before you see a man who is not," vowed Arthur. "A hookem-snivey thing out for Number One first and last and always—like a magpie, or a jay. And, same as them, only nice to look at outside."

"I wouldn't go so far as that," answered James. "As a judge of character, your own adventure with her have rather shook your cleverness, Partridge. As well it might; but I'm older and I'm inclined to think her fault is a lightness of mind beyond any cure. No ballast and no place for it. She's not built to love in a proper, dignified, everlasting way. True love be left out of her; but I wouldn't go so far as to say there were signs of vice. What she will want is a solid and terrible wise and stern man, to l'arn her what's demanded of women when they marry and what's forbidden 'em—a man with more chin than forehead, as my mother says."

"Every man's got forehead enough for a pair of horns," answered Partridge. "And, whether or no, there's no solid and wise man will ever touch her. Such would see through her and know what they was laying up. It would be just like the creature to put a Londoner, with all his monkey tricks, before people such as me and Warner Lidstone. They say the tobacconist has got a good business and you can just see Gilyan mincing it and rolling her eyes in a tobacco shop.''

''She don't care for money. She's all for adventures—she told me that long ago.''

''Ah, it's Warner Lidstone will have the adventures,'' prophesied Arthur, ''and I hope to God she throws him over for his own sake. Let her take this bloke and see how long he'll stand her. The thing in my mind be this: ought we or ought we not to tell him—Warner, I mean—how I've seen them two poking about behind hedges and out of sight together?''

''If you do, 'twill show one thing,'' warned James. ''It will show cruel clear you've been spying, Arthur.''

''Ain't it our duty to look after his interests?''

''In a manner of speaking it might be; but it's straining reason to say it's your duty to keep your eye on his sweetheart, and he'd be the first to tell you so—sharper than you might like. You've also got to ask yourself whether you're doing it out of friendship for the man, or hate against the woman.''

Arthur considered.

''About half and half,'' he answered, ''but I don't want my hate for the woman to lose me my job.''

''Then keep out of it. She's refused to marry before autumn, so his doom be still doubtful.''

''I'm going down the valley after work,'' said Partridge, ''and I shall drop in at Withy Lease to see if I can pick up anything from her grandmother or 'Frog' Fawden. I dare say they've heard a bit about it. Everybody do in these cases, except them nearest the middle. She won't be back from the pleasurings till after nightfall.''

''Keep out of it,'' Jimmy again advised, ''and be careful. If you go, don't you tell them anything they don't know. It might be a libel to say you've seen her and the Londoner about together."

"I won't say so," promised Arthur. "I'll just pass the time of day and take Mark a little bag of apples that I've got for him from the store. I axed Matthew and he said by all means—'Christmas Permains' they are and want eating."

Partridge kept his word and after dark dropped into the neat, ochre-washed kitchen of Withy Lease. Mark was smoking beside the fire and welcomed the apples heartily.

"They come very pat," he said, "for I've got the rheumatism offering in my neck a good bit. After these there's only 'Sturmer pippins' left, I expect."

"The sun's drawing power now and us shall soon be through the worst," declared Partridge.

"Ban't they back?" asked Jennifer, who was laying the supper.

"Not they. You can trust Harold Lidstone to make a night of it and keep London hours for once."

"She'll have had her supper, no doubt."

" 'Cheat-the-Boys'? For certain she will."

"Don't you call her that, else she may remember it against you when she comes to reign," warned Jennifer. "She hates it."

"We often do hate the truth," replied Partridge lighting his pipe. "And if I haven't a right to call her that, Mrs. Purchase, who have?"

"She never encouraged you, Arthur."

"That's what they always say—well knowing that in a thousand cunning ways they did encourage us. It ain't only words: it's looks and nods and smiles; it's in the way they listen to us; it's in the way they pass us. And, without any feeling of revenge or anything like that, I hope Gilyan will be served some day as she served others. And if justice is done, it will happen."

Jennifer sighed.

"You may get your beastly wish sooner than you think for," she said, but Mark stopped her.

"There, there, missis. Stow that. You're too fond of looking at the dark side of things. Because you was a gay old lady-bird and flew a few dangerous flights afore you settled down, it don't follow Gilyan's like that. No good meeting trouble halfway."

"And no need," she answered. "Trouble's all the way and on top of you afore you can look round, or escape it most times. I wish to God the man would go back to his tobacco shop and stop there anyhow."

Arthur pricked up his ears and Mark spoke.

"There's no wickedness in him; in fact, for such a smart sort of a town man, he's out of the common innocent. He only feels the same as most young fellows feel when they come up against your grand-daughter. He'd never wrong his cousin. He knows it's an accomplished fact, and nobody could have been nicer to you, with his presents and his snuff and all."

"And why should he be nice to me? What am I to him?"

"He's nice to everybody; butter wouldn't melt in his mouth," said Partridge, "and since you be treading that ground and I'm friendly to everybody and my own insults forgot, I'd like to know how your Gilyan looks at Harold Lidstone."

"You mind your own business, Arthur," advised Mark amiably. "You can take this from me, too," he added. "Gilyan looks at him as at a relation by marriage—no more and no less."

"There's all sorts of relations by marriage. A husband and a wife, for instance. And if there's danger to Warner, then it's up to somebody to tell him of it."

"There ain't," vowed Mr. Fawden; "not a shadow of no such thing. She's got a large and friendly way with her, and be so overflowing with generosity that she won't let a strange dog pass her if he looks kindly. And it's quite natural that a smart, clever man, like Harold Lidstone, should please and amuse her. And nobody gladder than her sweetheart that she should be pleased and amused."

"Come and pick a bit of rabbit pie, Arthur, and shut your mouth about 'em," said Jennifer. "Did Mrs. Lidstone go along with the pleasure party?"

"She did not," answered Partridge, and he and Mark came to the table.

But the subject was not changed: it proved too absorbing and Mrs. Purchase herself put the next question.

"Would you reckon that Warner Lidstone's mother knows aught about it?" she asked.

"Knowing her, I should say she does," answered Arthur. "There's not much misses her—nothing where her son's good be concerned. Your Gilyan won't come it over her."

"'Tis time the tobacconist went home," declared Mark, "and the wonder is somebody hasn't given him the hint. What does he do all day?"

"Moons about, and talks, and keeps you from your work," explained Partridge. "Always got a pleasant word and a joke and a pipe of tobacco for everybody—I grant that."

"Do Lucy Lidstone go about much with him?" asked Jennifer.

"She did: she don't now. Of course we ain't behind the scenes in the family; but I think Miss Lidstone's got no use for him no more. Doubtless the reason's good."

"I must see Warner's mother," declared Jennifer, "and if she knows about this, the wonder is she haven't come to see me. Not a word did she say when we took supper there, Mark?"

"Not a word; that's a long time ago. The row came after—when Warner ran over here and Gilyan took on.''

'' 'Row' is too big a word,'' declared Mrs. Purchase.

''Better mark time and hope for the best,'' advised Mark and the subject was finally relinquished.

But one of the party learned much more ere the day was done and Jennifer's worst fears became realised when, an hour later, sounded the humming of a motor car and Gilyan was driven home. The rest of the party had alighted at Orchard Lands, but Warner, who had seen too little of his sweetheart throughout the day, took the opportunity of a brief love-making, drove with her to Withy Lease, left her there and returned in the motor car to Marldon. Then, Mark having gone to bed, Gilyan sat by the embers of the dying fire and spoke to her grandmother.

''A brave revel and good weather for it, and I hope you've enjoyed your treat,'' said Jennifer. ''Be sure you won't take a cup of chocolate or something?''

''No; we've been eating and drinking all the time; and a hell of a day I've had.''

''My stars! Not enjoyed it? What went wrong, Gilyan?''

The girl considered before replying. She was pale and her voice fluttered as though she were in pain.

''I'd best to tell you. A very terrible thing have happened to me, and I don't know exactly yet what to do about it.''

''We've been talking about you tonight,'' answered Jennifer. ''Nobody wishes you well more than Mark and me do and we feel a good bit put about on your account.''

She omitted any mention of Arthur's visit.

''What have you got to be put about for?'' asked Gilyan.

''Because we very well know there's something on your mind.''

''So there is then. I've found out a fearful thing.''

Jennifer looked at her and waited, but did not speak.

"A very fearful, shattering thing indeed, and the last thing ever I thought to find out," added Gilyan.

"As what?" asked her grandmother.

"Nought about Warner, but all about me. And why for I tell you I don't know, for you can't do anything about it. I—I find I was terrible mistook, gran'. I don't love him—not a pinch. I like him and respect and admire him; but that's miles away from loving him. I've got no nature in me tonight. I'm finger-cold and my head aches. And what I'm going to do about it the Lord knows."

"Go to bed and try to sleep," answered Jennifer. "'Twas something much like this I've been expecting."

"I can't hide things and no more can Harold. It's him—Harold Lidstone. I never knew what love was afore I saw him. I didn't know I was born afore I saw him. That man's my God!"

Jennifer took the confession calmly. Tribulation there must be but, so far as her grand-daughter was concerned, tribulation, perhaps, of no lasting nature.

She proved worldly, wasted no time on sentiment and considered only how best to break this news at Orchard Lands.

"I dare say it won't surprise 'em very much," she said.

"It won't surprise any of 'em but him—Warner, I mean. Nobody's squeaked to him."

"Nobody wouldn't dare; but if you're off him, he's got to know."

"I wish to God t'other had come down a bit sooner. I wouldn't have had a cruel thing like this happen to such a kind man as Warner Lidstone for the whole world. I'd go through with it even now—only Harold says it would be a far greater crime to take him than throw him over."

"It's got to be done—in justice to him, Gilyan. You've no right to him if you don't love him."

"I thought I did—may I die this minute if I didn't. But now, at last, I know what love means. It's far, far different from anything over I felt afore."

"I dare say it is. You can't mistake the real thing when you've felt it; but often mistake other things for it till you have. And what about the tobacconist?"

"He'll blow his brains out I shouldn't wonder, if he don't get me."

"I hope he's not that sort."

"He's all right. He's as put about as I am. He never loved before. I'm the man's life."

"Then you must face it. Better you tell Warner and get through the trouble as quick as may be. Of course a lot of nasty things are going to be said."

"I don't care a straw what's said, for I shan't be here to hear 'em; but I do care for Warner's feelings and I'm going to tell him in a way that will spare him all I can. Nothing's too good for Warner—nothing; and this is a very fine escape for him. But he's not going to feel that. There's a lot goes to this. I've got to be cleverer than I ever was in my life. I'll go to bed now. There's a plan in my mind to show Warner I'm not so bad as I shall look—a great plan. But I'll keep shut on it for the present."

"Don't make no silly plans," urged Mrs. Purchase. "Do the proper, honest thing and brave it out, and then take t'other and clear away and live it down. That's pretty much what I had to do—more than once, too."

"Just wait and say nothing to nobody," replied Gilyan. "I tell you I've got my ideas, and so soon as I'm sure they're right, I shall act on 'em. I might do something rash very likely; but it will look a lot more rash than it is. I've promised to meet Harold tomorrow, out of reach of the lot of 'em, and after that something will happen."

"Don't run away with him and leave the burden on me," said Jennifer. "Be straight whatever else you are."

"You needn't fear. I shan't run away. I shall face the music and come out of it so well as I can. And no honest man will blame me—not if I do it right."

Then Gilyan went to bed, leaving her grandmother to ponder the tragical situation.

CHAPTER IX

THE APPEAL TO JAMES

"THE world is full of mysteries," said James Woodley to Matthew Fawden. Jimmy was bringing in his plough-horses and the orchard man walked beside him.

"That's no news," answered the elder. "We all know the world don't get easier."

"I axed myself yesterday why for it should be darker at half after five in the morning than half after five in the evening; and I didn't see no way to explain," continued Woodley, "and again I axed myself why for two old blids, like my mother and Paul Neck, the publican, should want to be married, instead of going along as they are—friends. And again I couldn't see no answer."

"The first question is a damned silly one, and I don't think no better of you for putting it," answered Matthew. "You might just so well ask why is it dark at midnight and light at mid-day. Only a gawk would want to know I reckon, and I hope you won't ask anybody else, for your credit's sake. As to Mrs. Woodley and Paul at 'The Church House,' that's quite another order of mystery and it may not be true to begin with."

"It's true enough. They've been addicted to each other for years, and they're both been married afore, so I suppose they like the idea of being married again. But you'd think up over sixty people would let well alone in that matter."

"I can't throw no light on marriage," answered Mr. Fawden. "It was not a state I was ever much inclined to, or much inclined to admire either; but England's a free country and your mother is a very sensible woman indeed, and Paul's a very sensible man indeed—much above the common run and my best friend after my brother. So if they please to join up, it's not for us bachelors to question 'em.''

''I'm like you,'' answered Jimmy. ''I'm not very hopeful about married life, though I own I wanted a wife not long since. But the idea was quenched, and it haven't revived, and if my mother takes Neck, the question arises where do I come in? If mother goes to 'The Church House,' she'll leave my cottage on my hands.''

''They won't forget you,'' answered Matthew.

''For that matter I've got a postcard in my pocket this minute,'' proceeded James. ''From Paul Neck it comes, and he asks me to go up over and see him one evening. And I believe that means how things are coming to a crisis between him and mother. No doubt they want to know my views about my house and my future state.''

''Neck will see a way. And so do I. In fact, where's the difficulty? You stop here all the time, instead of going home to your dinner as you do now.''

''When you say 'home' you touch the spot,'' answered the younger. ''There won't be no home for me on this earth if mother leaves the cottage. Orchard Lands be the place of my work, but not my home, Matthew; and 'The Church House' is too far off, and I never could feel a public house was a home exactly, even if they gave me a room.''

''Well, Paul will have ideas.''

''You shall know 'em if he has,'' promised James. ''I can't see my mother married again somehow; though not a word against Paul Neck, I'm sure. He's a very large-minded man and a man to look up to, in fact—same as I look up to you, Matthew.''

But when the next night fell and Jimmy tramped to Higher Marldon, ate his meal with Paul and Betsy and afterwards had speech with the innkeeper, nothing very definite came of it. Gilyan Neck was also there—after a long day spent with Betsy—and for a time her affairs occupied the conversation.

James observed no restraint in Gilyan, and no evidence of any trouble. She seemed happy, treated him as though the past had never been and begged that he would see her homeward and not leave 'Church House' without her.

When supper was ended and Gilyan and Betsy left them alone, Mr. Neck discussed both girls.

"There's something in the wind," he said. "It ain't all as it should be, Jimmy, and I dare say you know it as well as me."

"You mean Harold Lidstone?"

"Yes, I think. Betsy is jonic where Gilyan's concerned; she may know her secrets, or she may not. Anyway she wouldn't tell me. But I read character, James—even female character, and though a maiden be hardest of all to read—because women grow a bit simpler in my experience as they grow older—still, behind Gilyan's noise and nonsense, I read something."

"So do us at Orchard Lands," said the other, "and so do Mark Fawden and her gran'mother likewise. In fact, everybody smells danger and I wouldn't even say but Mrs. Lidstone herself do."

"And Lucy Lidstone have fallen out with the tobacconist, they tell me."

"So Arthur Partridge says."

"You see my daughter is a very good friend to Lucy and a very good friend to Gilyan—the best, true friend of her own sex that Gilyan's got, or ever will have; and now Lucy and Gilyan—since that pleasure trip to Paignton—be at daggers drawn—so Betsy says. And why, Jimmy? Because, when they was there, Harold spent all his time favouring Gilyan and not troubling twopence over Lucy. And the long and short is that between them two girls, Betsy finds herself in a very difficult position. Her one thought, of course, is to bring 'em friends again; but it's difficult, because Lucy's loyal to her brother and don't think Gilyan's behaving properly to him, and if she but whispers a fault in Gilyan to Warner, then, of course, he turns against his own sister, as a man in love naturally would do."

"I'm sure it's a very sad come-along-of-it and I hope Mr. Harold will clear out. Arthur Partridge says he's mad in love with Gilyan and believes that we shall hear any minute they've cut and run together. And a good riddance if they did."

"Fancy!" murmured Mr. Neck. "How much do Betsy know I wonder?"

"I be come to the opinion it's better to have no truck with the women," declared James. "Your niece, Gilyan, turned me down as you know, Paul, and though a blow at the time, I've seen such a light on her ways since, that I'm glad she did."

"There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out—and probably even better, Jimmy. Now, in my judgment, you are very much the sort of man to shine as a husband and, without flattering you, I honestly believe the woman who gets you will be a very fortunate one."

"Thank you, I'm sure. So mother says; and no doubt you mean it. But good wives are scarce and I don't want no ugly, cat-handed woman. If ever I try again she'll have to be fair to middling, Paul. I shouldn't look for a lovely piece like Gilyan Neck no more. Beauty ain't for me; but, failing that, I demand good sense and a good figure."

"Have you ever thought on Ethel Billings?" asked Mr. Neck, and James flushed and stared.

"God's light! And so you think so cruel poor of me you'd call a woman like that good enough!"

"What's the matter with her?"

But Mr. Woodley was either more sharp, or more sensitive, than Paul Neck had imagined.

"I don't know that there's anything the matter with her, but a voice like a guinea-hen and a face like a flat-iron and a body like a board," he answered; "but evidently you think there must be a lot the matter with me. And I'm glad I respect myself, as a manly man, a bit more than you seem to do; and if you'd said 'Ethel Billings' to my mother, Paul, she might have surprised you."

"Well, well. It was her character called her to my mind; not her appearance. I dare say at my age, I forget that a fine, young man like you wants something more than character," replied Mr. Neck mildly. "But there's plenty of nice, personable girls about. There's Mercy Chick, for instance—Japhet Chick's daughter."

"A little go-by-the-ground like her! Why, she wouldn't come much above the bottom of my waistcoat."

"She'd bring a hundred pounds, however. That I happen to know."

"She's tokened, anyway."

"I believe not. But there's another you must know very well—Clara Toms, Mrs. Lidstone's right hand at Orchard Lands. She was going to take John Bulley, my potman's nephew; but that's off."

"And why is it off?" asked James. "Because John wanted for Clara to buy herself a new set of false teeth and offered to pay half the price of 'em. But when he made the proposal, in the kindest spirit, she flared up and chucked him instanter. Not that I've anything against her. She's too good for John Bulley, I dare say—teeth or no teeth."

"Well, well, of course, the details and the woman are your business, and it's only because I thought you was fairly wishful to wed that I mention the matter at all. Still, between good friends, you can't fail to see it would be a great thing for your mother and me, if you were hitched up and could go and live in your own house when she leaves it. Then she'd feel no more anxiety on that score and probably come to me without much more vexatious delayings. But since she has told me in so many words that she won't marry me till you've found a wife to look after you, you'll see I feel a good deal of interest in the matter. I wouldn't seek to hurry you, or anything like that, Jimmy, but if you was to give your mind to it, you'll be doing both your mother and me a good turn. We don't grow younger and it has taken her a parlous long time to make up her mind at best.''

''If you hadn't gone and mentioned Miss Billings, I'd have felt kinder about it,'' replied the horseman. ''That have shook me, Paul, because to see yourself as others see you is always a very shaking thing. But I bear no malice and I shall keep an open mind and let Providence bring what it will. Only don't name no more names, because so sure as you do, that party is done for. Nought puts you off a woman more than being told she's just the one for you; and if I'd tried to ram my mother down your throat, you'd have hated her afore now. And you've also got to remember that it's not so long since I had a facer in the shape of Gilyan at the Windmill. I be very much in a mood to let sleeping dogs lie for the minute, I assure you.''

''For that matter, I don't see myself why you can't live at your house without a wife,'' replied Paul. ''But Sarah's got a fixed idea you'd let down the place and mess it up and neglect the garden and so on, if you lived there without a better half. She's always been a bit house-proud, you must remember, and the fact she likes me well enough to leave her old home for me is a remarkable sign.''

''I can promise no more than to think on it,'' replied James; ''and that I will do. The Lord may send a woman, like the ram caught in the thicket; but she's got to be the sacrifice this time—not me. I don't take any Jill or

Joan for your convenience, Paul, and you didn't ought to demand it."

Mr. Woodley still smarted a little, but he calmed down as he returned homeward and, with his usual, large charity, considered Sarah and Paul. He spoke aloud to Gilyan, who walked beside him.

"No doubt to them love is real as it is to the young," he said, "and they can see no loss of dignity. My mother and your Uncle Paul Neck, I mean. Only no choosing and advising for me; I won't have it after the dose you gave me."

"Blast marriage," said Gilyan.

CHAPTER X

THE MIND OF GILYAN

In private at this season Mary Lidstone spoke to her daughter and ventured on a prophecy. Within three days Harold was to leave Orchard Lands, after a holiday of six weeks' duration, and as yet he had indicated no over-mastering emotion save gratitude for the hospitality he had received.

But Mrs. Lidstone saw signs and, indeed, had taken Lucy's estimate of the situation. Their talk today solely concerned the problem of Warner.

"I itch to tell him, and yet how can one do it?" asked Lucy.

"You can't; and it don't matter now, poor dear chap, because he's going to know within twenty-four hours, I reckon. The man wouldn't be so base as to leave without owning up if anything is to come of it; and I hope to God the woman has decided once for all against Warner and won't keep him in doubt over-long."

"She'd never have the face to go back on her word, mother. Besides, it's all a matter of business with Gilyan, and even if she is liking Harold, what has he got to offer, compared to what my brother has?"

"A great deal more for that matter. To be in a tobacconist's shop would be far finer in Gilyan's eyes than to live here among the apple trees. There's much about Harold that would attract a girl like her. In a way you might call 'em well suited. I know he's in love with her, and I think she's in love with him, and I wish they would own up and be done with it before Harold goes."

"Ain't it amazing Warner can't see it?"

"No; that's natural enough. He'll only see it in her good time; but if she don't mean to show it to him——"

"Who could—with a grain of proper feeling?"

"Proper feeling has nothing to do with love," said Mrs. Lidstone. "It's outside every feeling but itself. Manners and customs and religion and rules of behaviour can't touch it, or tame it. If, as I think, Harold has come to be all and all to her, then Warner and you and me and Orchard Lands are shrunk down to no more than a tattered cobweb in her mind, Lucy. And if she feels so, I should judge it won't trouble her to let Warner down—any more than it troubled her to have a bit of fun at the expense of Partridge and Woodley."

"She wouldn't dare—your son!"

"She's a great contradiction," declared Lucy's mother. "What she would, or wouldn't dare, who can tell? And yet, just when I've been thinking that she was as hard as a pebble, I've heard her flash out with a thought, or wish, or hope that couldn't have come out of a bad heart exactly. She won't be none too happy about this really, because she must see that such a man as Warner is a good many sizes too fine to be treated so."

And in truth nobody knew this better than Harold and his cousin's sweetheart. They were deeply concerned for the situation created by their passion, and while Gilyan had already confessed to the interloper that she must wed him or none, her wits were very active on Warner's behalf. The problem was to impress upon her betrothed the tremendous nature of the obstacle that now stood between them. Had it been anybody of less account, this aspect of the matter had perhaps not long delayed Gilyan, or troubled Harold; but the girl appeared to cherish and respect Warner even more, now that she was determined to throw him over, than when first engaged to him; and her devotion to Warner, her feminine consideration of his feelings, impressed themselves also upon the sensitive Harold. He found himself quite uninspired and could make no suggestion of how to break the cruel truth to Warner in a manner sufficiently human and also inexorable. But Gilyan rose to the ordeal and finally determined upon a course of action. It must be exceedingly unpleasant to herself, but she welcomed it so much the more. Her problem was interesting, and one might have read in it a light on her own psychology. She traversed the situation through many sleepless nights and at last came to conclusions which it was possible to put into words for Harold. The best of her and the worst participated in her decision. It was inspired by generous motives; but they were to display themselves in an egregious action. She loved intrigue, not only for what it might achieve, but for itself; and now she intrigued all alone until her course of action appeared clear to her. Then it was necessary to seek the confidence of somebody else; and seeing the nature of the thing she had determined to do, there were but two people in the world who could be trusted to help her. One was her grandmother, the other, Harold Lidstone. But her grandmother, though probably to be trusted, would be physically unequal to the part of confidante: that needed somebody who was strong and agile and prepared to endure only less discomfort than herself. And yet there were good reasons why Harold should not help her. She considered, therefore, if some innocent outsider might be drawn in, to take his part all ignorant of the fact that it had been chosen very carefully for him, and he for it. Such a man might be called to do what was necessary, but never guess that anything save chance had implicated him in the tragicomedy Gilyan now designed to play. Her own performance in any case would be touch and go, and she could not afford to leave even the least detail doubtful.

At this point of her cogitations she felt that another must know all that she proposed to do. To see Harold alone was now difficult; but she went to tea at Orchard Lands two days before his departure and succeeded in reaching his hand with a note when none saw. He transferred the piece of paper to his pocket, read it later on and found that Gilyan directed him to meet her at two in the morning by the forking roads half a mile from her home. It was the spot whence she had started for the Windmill on the day she promised to marry Warner; and here Harold duly kept the tryst, on a night so dark that he must have lost his way a dozen times had it been possible to do so. His room at Orchard Lands was on the ground floor and he had no difficulty in leaving and returning to the house by the window.

Gilyan awaited him and began to talk the moment that he reached her.

"There's a shed in a field a hundred yards from here," she said. "We'll go there. Thank God you've come. I've settled how it is to be, but there's one point——"

"I've settled too," he said. "I'm going to tell Warner before I go."

"No—I won't have that. It's my place to tell him; and I want to tell him in such a way there'll be no shadow after and no hard words, nor yet evil thoughts between you and the rest of them."

"That's impossible. I must stand the racket, not you, Gilyan."

They came to the shippon and sat together on the shaft of a cart within it. Then she explained and laid bare her innermost thoughts as no man had ever yet heard them.

"I know love now," she said, "and it's made me feel very different towards everybody—even those I don't love. Seemingly you can't love a man as I love you, Harold, without something happening in your feelings to the rest of the people."

"Ah!" he cried. "That's true as God! I've felt it the same. Nobody looks the same in my eyes as they did before I saw you. One allows for everybody's troubles now and wishes everybody well."

"Then what must I be feeling to Warner? After you I think only of him. He's more in my mind than you for the minute; and that's natural, because you mean all the future of my life. But first, there's him. I've got to let him out of this so as he'll win nothing but respect. I've got to show him the nature of my feelings, and that can't be done by mere words: words are far too small for it. I must do something terrible big—to show him what you mean to me."

"Well, you're doing something big, because you're feeling something big. You've got to tell him you didn't know what real love was till you met me."

"Yes; but merely saying that and breaking my promise isn't nearly enough. Any fool could do that."

"That's all there is to it, however. He's got to take your word and believe you wouldn't have done it for anything less than what you feel to me. Perhaps you might break with him and leave me for a few months. Not that there's any secret now—except for him: his mother and sister know well enough."

"They do," she said, "and I don't fret about them, because they're glad. They hate me and reckon he's well out of it. They're only waiting for me to tell him, because they will not, and he's too straight and simple to find it out for himself."

"Then you must tell him, if you won't let me."

"I'm going to tell him. That's why I got you out here tonight, Harold. I'm going to tell him; but not with stupid, mean speeches. I want to suffer over this and let my sufferings tell him. There's something in me warns me I must suffer; but I want to be clever over it too. I want for something to happen, to show Warner how deeply I'm feeling; how I'm swept away; how I'm torn in half between love and duty. It's all turning round in my brain —love for you and duty and sorrow for him; and I respect him so much that I must show him how tremendously this has altered me and how—oh, it's difficult to put into words; but it will be easy enough to do. Only I can't do it alone."

"Go slow, Gilly: I'm not following you very clear."

She began again.

"The deed is easy; the words to describe it are difficult. It's play-acting what I mean to do; and yet it's not all play-acting; for I feel it will be quite real. I shouldn't have thought of it, or nerved myself up to do it, if it hadn't been real. It came to me out of my feeling for him, and you can feel a terrible lot to a man without loving him. The bigger the thing I do to show him I can't marry him and the more hopeless and tragical I feel, the less fearful for him afterwards to lose me. D'you understand that?"

"Damned if I do."

"Oh, I wish the right words would come," she cried impatiently. "Look at it like this then. Suppose I made Warner understand that the fix I found myself in was such that only by killing myself could I get out of it. Wouldn't that make him feel that my position was even worse than his? Wouldn't he have to say, then, that I mustn't be kept to my promise? Wouldn't he be as sorry for me as for himself? Wouldn't he haste to forgive me for loving you so well as to want to kill myself about it? Wouldn't it make it more bearable for him to do without me after?"

"You want to save his face, in a way?"

"I want him to see me so frantic and driven between my respect for him and my respect for my promise to him on the one side, and my love for you on the other. I want him to see me in such a fearful fix that it looks, to me, as if death was the only way out. And when I think of him and all his patient faith and goodness, I do feel as if I ought to die after I've thrown him over. And then, when I think of you, I know very well I must live; because I've got as many lives as a cat for love of you."

"Well, so I feel. So why d'you talk of dying and what's the sense of all this? He must know, and it's my place to tell him and suffer the blame. It's no new thing. We'll live it down."

"We'd never live it down and you'd be separated from your family forever more if we did like that. Listen. I can't die; but I can pretend to die. There's always the river. I fling myself in, and somebody sees me do it and pulls me out. Then how does life look?"

He whistled gently.

"You could do a thing like that?"

"Yes, I could; and I tell you again that it wouldn't be all play-acting either. When I jumped in the water, I swear I shouldn't be thinking I was going to be rescued. I should be thinking only that it was the proper way. As I couldn't marry Warner for love of you, my only decent action would be to get out of it. Then I'm saved and confess to Warner that I meant to die, because I couldn't keep my word; and the size of the thing I meant to do makes his own loss look less and makes me less hateful in the eyes of other people. And the rest is up to you."

He understood clearly enough now.

"By God! Fancy you scheming all that! You weren't called 'Cheat-the-Boys' for nothing, Gilly. I don't know—I don't like it! Supposing anything went wrong."

"I don't want to die; but I want to feel I'm going to die. I can do my part all right. It's about the other part that you must help. I tell you the hour and the place; but who is going to save me? Did it ought to be Warner, or you, or somebody outside it all? The right way would be for some outsider to stop me."

"The game's not worth the candle. There's too much risk."

"I'm going to do it, however. I'm fixed for it. I'm glad there's a risk."

"Then I must be the man, Gilyan. If I save you, there need be no danger. We can just get wet and I take you home and lie about the details. I won't have any element of danger whatever. We can make up that. Yes, I'd better be the one. I'll tell a finer story about it than anybody else."

"You would; but you're the last they'd believe," she said. "A lot too thin for you to tell them you'd suddenly found me in the water. That would spoil all and nobody would believe it—not even Warner, I should think."

"With anybody else there might be a danger for you. You can't time these things to a moment—unless you know what's going to happen."

"Yes, you can, if you want to. I've only got to know when a certain man is at a certain place where our river's deep enough. He comes along and I know he's there—at a bridge or plank—but he doesn't know I've seen him. He hears a cry and a splash. He sees a woman in the water and he drags her out. She's unconscious; but she's all right. You've only got to be sure of your man. There's some would let me drown and pretend they knew nothing about it after."

She laughed and he shivered.

"Don't say things like that. I hate this business."

" 'Frog' would go in for me—Mark Fawden, I mean. He might be the safest, and I'd know to a minute or two when he'd be over the hand-bridge. In fact I'd trust anybody but Arthur Partridge. Perhaps even him. I feel so kind to everybody now-a-days."

"Let us tell Warner together and drop all this nonsense. We've been straight. We're not to blame. He'll understand."

"No; I will have it so, Harold. I owe it to him. I owe it to myself, if not to you. D'you think I've got no feelings? It's often hard to show your feelings and I will show them—I will show them this time. You've got to help me plan the thing—for tomorrow. It must happen tomorrow. I'll do it. I don't care. And I hate you for saying it's nonsense. And if you can't think of a way I'll drown in earnest."

Dimly perceiving things hidden in Gilyan and half proud of them, half fearful, Harold turned his mind to the details. His instinct was to regard her proposals as farcical; but he knew they were not farcical to her. Her confusion of mind was quite beyond his power to analyse. Any attempt to do so led to secret amusement, which he hid. He strove to be practical and consider the difficulties. His natural levity was smothered by the situation she proposed to create.

"Afterwards you've got to get home drenched to the skin," he said, "so the nearer the place is to your house, the shorter the journey for you and the less danger."

They considered the theatre of the scene and Gilyan made it clear. An old wooden bridge of timber spanned the central waters just beyond the first withy-bed. There the river ran deep and a man emerging from the willows would come abruptly to the crossing; or a man approaching by the path from the meadows might pass the corners of a broken wall and come upon the spot without previous vision of it.

"That's the place," she decided; and then she had an inspiration.

"It's impossible to plan it for anybody else now," she said; "but it's not impossible for you to ask Warner to go for a walk with you on your last day, and it's not impossible for you to bring him just there. The truth he must never know, or anybody else on earth; but if you and he was to come there just in time to see me fling myself into the deep water from the withies a few yards below the bridge, then you could save me between you; and then he would know I'd tried to drown myself and not rest till he'd found out why. And he'd never tell nobody else."

The other gasped, for he saw more.

"And then Warner, being what he is, would give you up himself!" he said.

"That's what I was going to tell you," she answered.

"And then?"

"Then, very like, I shall find myself loving him again better than you!"

"Gilyan!"

" 'Tis time we were gone. The hour is all that's left to fix. You'll have to be clever and just wander along with him and not make it seem you're bound for one place more than another."

He shivered again and did not answer. For a few moments both were quite silent.

"The dawn's near breaking," Gilyan said presently. "I hear the owls going home. Towards morn they hoot as though they were tired with their night's work. I dare say they are."

They moved and returned to the road.

"What will you be saying to Warner as you walk beside him tomorrow?" she asked.

"That's a question. Better leave it to me."

"Don't say a word to bring me into his mind."

"No, no. The thing must happen as an awful surprise to us both—I see that."

"I'll be hid at noon, and you talk loud as you come to the hedge. Then, when I hear you, I shall jump."

"I fear it. I fear something horrible."

"Fear it or not, that's how it will happen," she answered.

In ten minutes they had parted, while a first shadowy greyness of morning already ran along the black hill-tops above them and touched the river in the dark of the meadows beneath.

Harold returned to Orchard Lands under many mingled emotions, and again and again felt waves of dread flow over him as he strove to face the pretences, histrionics and perils of the coming day; while she, calmer and happier than she had felt for many weeks, crept home again. A certain fatalistic enjoyment numbed her nerves. She anticipated with something akin to pleasure the plunge into the deep water. She would leap in as the water-voles and let what happen might. Weary in body and mind she cared little for the moment as to the issue.

She was soon in bed and slept instantly and heavily until her grandmother awakened her some hours later.

CHAPTER XI

THE PLAY-ACTORS

If Warner Lidstone has appeared but as a shadow in this narrative of his love adventure, the aspect of presentment is unfair to him. A shadow indeed he was from the world's point of view, even as most other individual men and women of his temperament. For to be amiable is to be shadowy and of small account in social life as now constituted. The business of existence has become so complex and urgent that urbanity and graciousness are qualities only considered to waste time. Modesty, reserve, tact are distinctions belonging, for the moment, to the past and future; and Warner's kindly nature, his deference and his good heart, which revealed itself in good manners, were appreciated by his mother and sister, but regarded as evidences of weakness by most people. He was slow to perceive that Gilyan had changed. His native instincts, intensified by the love he felt, made it impossible for him to suppose that love, such as she had declared, could become clouded or diminished while his own burned so radiantly; but, little by little, he read the fatal signs, and his inability to do so made Lucy despair. She trembled to speak and take her brother's side against these two. She hated Harold and was openly scornful of him; but after his first reproof, when she came to him indignant from her meeting with the pair on Windmill Hill—after Warner's sharp remonstrance on that occasion and his concern for Gilyan's subsequent upset—Lucy took very good care to champion her brother no more. She understood that his sweetheart's power was absolute, and now, believing that Gilyan cared not a straw for Warner, only smarted to know how long the present unreal situation was to continue.

Her mother shared her indignation and had already determined to speak to Gilyan, strip the matter to the root, and invite the girl to be honest and pretend no longer. Then Harold fixed the day for his departure and Mary Lidstone, judging him not brave enough to confess save by letter, suspected with his return to London would come the revelation for her ill-used son.

And Warner, brooding much, conscious that a spirit of unrest was in the house, aware that his relations with Lucy were strained, himself sharing a part of the tension and emotion revealed, more in silence than speech round about him, began to understand. The obvious thing had missed him. He perceived that Gilyan was distressed and more evasive and illusive than ever before; but he did not associate her agitation with any other man. The party at Paignton had, however, caught Harold in a reckless mood and now Warner began to feel suspicious. He, too, as his mother, in secret determined to speak to Gilyan as soon as Harold was gone home, that he might solve the riddle of her indifference and heaviness. She, who had been so lively and full of jests, now seemed to have lost her cheerful and sanguine habit of mind; she, who had looked forward so hopefully and rejoiced at the united life awaiting her with Warner, now evaded the future and even showed fretfulness when he turned to it.

He soon went in fear, for he perceived her change was radical and no passing phase of whims and moods. Already he began to consider the possibility of life without her and to weigh the melancholy significance of such a tragedy. He could not endure to think upon it. His gentle nature shook before the spectacle of losing her and the visions of life without her. She understood him so absolutely; with her best inspiration she had an art to wake in him a consciousness of power and an element of ambition that no other knew how to kindle. He felt the stronger for her companionship, the greater for her love. That she had, indeed, declared love for him, and revealed it in a thousand delicate and dainty ways, was a fact sufficient to invigorate and uplift him, and arouse a self-satisfaction until now he had never felt. Already he built on her. Unconsciously she was the foundation of his future plans and dreams; within him grew an attitude of mind to take larger views and develop enterprises that he had shrunk from single-handed, but which seemed now essential, if only out of respect for Gilyan's ambition. She was so great that she made his old-time, jog-trot attitude to life look small. And she was so great that alterations and increases, hazards and experiments, from which he would have turned without her impulse and support, now seemed imperative. She knew that she would make him think on a larger pattern and face life with greater assurance. She bred confidence: her love was a quickening thing and could not leave him where he was.

And now came these gathering elements of dread and doubt; and at first he felt more interested to learn from what they sprang than what they were. Was Gilyan to be blamed, or did the fault lie with himself? He saw the change in her but could not discover the causes of it. He looked for them in himself, yet they were not there; he considered the attitude of his mother and sister to Gilyan, but hesitated to blame them. That Lucy's indignation over her meeting was groundless he assured both her and himself; and not until the truth reached him did he actually associate Harold Lidstone with the loss of Gilyan's love. That she never had loved him; that she never had loved anybody until his cousin appeared, Warner did not learn until Harold was gone; but before that event, his own situation became clear. For he witnessed Gilyan's apparent attempt at self-destruction.

The matter fell out naturally enough and Harold asked his cousin to come for a walk the day preceding his departure.

"Goodness knows when we may see each other again," he said, "for I shall never get you to London now. I thought Lucy would come some day; but, for reasons I can't guess, Lucy is off me altogether. I don't know what the devil I've done to vex her, and if you could tell me I should be glad."

His purpose was to interest Warner so greatly in his conversation that he would walk beside him without caring in what direction they might go. He wanted automatically to guide to the river and time their arrival beside the water at a moment as near to that arranged with Gilyan as possible. He had planned the matter of his conversation and designed it as a fitting and dramatic prelude to the adventure before him and Warner. He proposed to better Gilyan's original inspiration; and if the thing that she was going to do would break her engagement, while leaving her rather a heroine than a commonplace jilt, then would he, too, state his position before Warner and so define his future intentions that his cousin could never remember him with other emotion than respect. He was minded much as the woman; indeed their parity of vision and their rather tawdry and theatrical instincts in various directions had been among those forces that drew them together.

Now Harold played his part with the greatest circumspection and rehearsed the very sentences he had framed and the fine sentiments he had committed to memory for this occasion. It is true he would not be sure of the line his cousin would take; and he knew that, while he played a part, Warner would represent reality and might furnish some of the surprises which only reality can furnish; but he understood the apple-grower well enough by this time and he guessed with great accuracy the line that his cousin would take. He had kept the friendship of Warner from the beginning of his visit and did not expect that he would lose it now. Harold possessed the qualities of his defects and acted so well that he felt his own acting and shared with Gilyan that power to move himself which great, natural comedians possess. Presently he began to feel deeply the things that he was saying and to express a regret for Lucy's unfriendly attitude that made his voice shake.

They walked along the lanes and Warner smoked his pipe, but Harold was too concerned to smoke. Warner endeavoured to calm him, for Harold began with Lucy again and reiterated his concern that he had lost her goodwill.

"I've got enough to fret me to madness without her. And in truth that's a little thing enough compared with what's on my mind; but still I'd give a lot to know where I took the wrong turn with Lucy, and what started it—whether it was anything I said, or anything I did."

"Can you remember when you saw the change? Of course, I've noticed it too—I grant that. I know her so well. I asked her; but she said that if I couldn't see it myself, it wasn't for her to tell me. All the same she said she was justified and I'd live to know it."

Harold stood still and showed deepest interest at this preliminary statement.

"Women have a power to read not only our actions and our words, but our thoughts," he said. "And what's more, I believe they can get at our thougnts before we can ourselves. Looking back I do believe that Lucy saw more than I saw; and it was what she saw angered her against me. And I was puzzled beyond measure, because I hadn't yet myself seen what she saw."

Warner shook his head.

"You go too deep for me," he answered. "I'm not particularly interested in what you feel, Harold. That's your own business and nothing to me, because I'm not an inquisitive sort of man; but I am interested, naturally, in what my future wife feels; and if you have any light to throw on that, you can befriend me by doing so. Something has upset the apple-cart: what I haven't the wit to understand. But Gilyan's under the weather. She can't hide that."

"I'm thankful to God you've touched the subject, Warner, for it was almost more than I could do to dare. But it was meant that we should clear up things before I left Marldon. You say what I feel don't interest you, and in the ordinary course of things there's no reason why it should; but, for once in a way, what I feel is very much to the point I believe, and though it may have nothing whatever to do with what Gilyan feels, on the other hand, it may. Understand that I've done nothing wrong—either in word or thought—that I will swear. I've suffered, Warner, and I am suffering; but I've done no wrong to you, or anybody here. I'm a straight man and I shouldn't have stopped under your roof and eaten your bread if I'd found myself opposed to you in any sort of way. In fact, it's only during the last few days that the position has become impossible and made it necessary for me to leave you."

"What position?"

Harold did not immediately reply; he was leading their steps to the meadows and concerned to interest Warner so deeply that when he presently opened a gate upon the river valley and proceeded to the stream, his cousin would not question the move but follow, his mind concentrated on Harold's revelation. He calculated the distance also and apportioned out the points of what he was to say in such order that he would have finished just in time for Gilyan to take up the tragical story before Warner's eyes.

"The position," continued Harold, "was created simply by the ordinary course of nature, and it arose so gradually and developed in such a strange, shadowy way that, when the reality appeared, I was staggered and for a long time couldn't believe my own senses. Be patient with me, old chap, and understand I have done nothing for which you have the right to blame me, or for which it is my duty to be ashamed. Grieved beyond measure I am, and bewildered too. I can honestly say I wish I'd died when I was so ill, rather than have lived to go through what I've got to go through now, Warner; but that's all there is to it—suffering and a life changed and perhaps saddened for evermore; but no shame—not an atom of shame or remorse or any such thing."

"What have you done then? And why do you say that what you feel may have something to do with what Gilyan feels—something to do with what's upsetting her just now?"

"I say it because it seems a reasonable thing to say. She's a generous and kindly woman with a quick understanding and a large heart. She's quite as clever as Lucy, and she may have found out what Lucy found out. She may have found it out long before I did—just as Lucy found it out before I did. And the difference is this: that Gilyan never blamed me or quarrelled with me, but was sorry for me—well knowing the fault was not mine; while Lucy was only sorry for you, not me."

"Don't spin so many words," said Warner mildly. "I'm not clever with words and you are rather fogging my understanding. You've got to something you say has happened, and Gilyan don't blame you for it and Lucy does. Well, if Gilyan don't blame you, be sure I shan't. Her judgment is not often out in her view of other people. But what is it? And I ask again, why should anything you have done, or could do, be likely to trouble her?"

"For this reason, that anybody else's sorrow would trouble her, more or less. She's quick to be sorry for other people when they need it, just as she's quick to be glad for them if they are lucky. I was terrible unlucky in what happened to me and she was sorry for my bad luck—that's all."

"And what was your bad luck?"

"I hoped you'd have seen that by now, without calling on me to say it in so many hateful words."

For the first time Warner showed impatience, but it was gentle.

"I tell you I'm not much of a hand for words, Harold. You're not ashamed. You've done nothing wrong; so why do you hang fire? I'm not likely to blame you; but I haven't got the gift to see what you're driving at, though I see it's on your nerves a good deal. So what is it?"

Harold was showing emotion now. They descended into the flats and strolled along a broken wall which ended at the bridge of wood. Beyond that, on the other side by the willows, would Gilyan be waiting. He temporised a little longer and then plumped out the truth.

"It is this, my dear Warner. Nobody is master of his fate where women are concerned. Our feeling to them and their power of attraction doesn't depend on anything outside us, or outside them. I meet a free girl—pretty, clever, kindly well-to-do—everything you could wish and desire; but I care nothing for her; and I meet perhaps a married woman—not pretty nor yet clever, nor even kindly—and there's that in her that makes me feel she's the only woman in the world for me and life's death without her. She's beyond my reach and she may not care a button for me, or see anything desirable in me; but there it is: something in her makes me love her—not her fault and certainly not mine; but just nature—nature that cares not a damn for our engagements, or promises, or undertakings. And so it was here. I saw Gilyan and I admired her, of course, and then I saw her again, and presently the day was dull when I didn't see her, and at last—when we went to Paignton it was—it burst upon me like a thunderstorm that I loved her better than anything on God's earth. Don't blame me and don't pity me—I'll have neither blame nor pity. I'm off tomorrow and you'll never see me again, for I'm loyal, Warner, and you know I wouldn't hurt a hair of your head, or shadow your peace and happiness by any act of mine. But I want you to understand that I couldn't help loving her, and I want you to see clearly that the moment I found it out, I made ready to be gone. And being far quicker and deep-seeing than me, Gilyan no doubt discovered what was happening before I did. She was too merciful to tell me and bid me be off; but she was sorry for me; she forgave me, as every true woman forgives love, because they know it's not a thing in a man's power to alter. And that's what has clouded her life, no doubt, and made her cast down and queer—just regret for my fix. She'll be all right so soon as I've taken my trouble out of her sight."

"She found out you loved her?"

"Oh, yes—don't think I told her, Warner."

"She told you, then?"

"Never. She wouldn't have done a thing like that. She just grew unhappy and sorry for me. We understood without words."

"Not sorry for herself? You're not going to tell me that, Harold?"

Thus all unconsciously Warner played into the other man's hand with a punctual and admirable fitness, at the right moment and in the right place. They were past the end of the wall and Gilyan had seen their heads approaching. She nerved herself now and, as they came to the bridge together, flung herself into the water, where it ran smoothly along the edge of the withy-beds eight feet deep. The action followed five seconds after her betrothed's last question, which Harold had been inspired to leave unanswered. The answer was now before them.

Warner's cousin uttered a wild cry before the catastrophe.

"By God, it's Gilyan!" he shouted; but the other had seen as swiftly as Harold. They ran together the dozen yards that separated them from her and Warner took the lead. She had sunk for a moment but rose as he reached the bank over her head and leapt into the water beside her. In a moment his left arm was round her while his right held the bank. Then came Harold and gripped his right hand and lifted Gilyan from the water as the other man drew her in.

She had not been immersed for a full minute, but appeared to be quite unconscious as they laid her flat on the bank. She speedily recovered, however, stared at them in dismay, then turned and flung herself down with her face hidden from them.

Harold took command.

"Before all things keep this a secret," he said. "Take her home and lie about it, Warner. Say she slipped and fell in while your back was turned, and make her say the same. I shall know nothing at all. I shall go back to Orchard Lands and explain that I left you with Gilyan. Then you come along presently and tell your mother how she fell in by accident. You must stick to that—it's the only way for us to keep our self-respect."

His part was played: it remained for Gilyan to proceed with hers, and this she did effectively enough, for her experience had been a painful one and she knew not yet how she would get out of it. She had swallowed a good deal of water and was feeling exceedingly miserable both for her own sake and Warner's. But what she had done made it easy enough to answer his questions. Its heroic altitude left the future only too clear in her old sweetheart's eyes: for he had seen her attmpt to take her life. It remained to know why; and this the girl with chattering teeth delayed a little to tell. But she made it easy for him to find out and presently he did.

They were soon at Withy Lease, where Warner, for the benefit of Mrs. Purchase, declared that Gilyan had slipped her foot and fallen into deep water, upon which he had jumped in after her and brought her to safety.

Then the girl went to her room and Jennifer brought some of Mark Fawden's garments for Warner. He was left in the kitchen, where he stripped and set his own jacket and trousers to dry. Mark's under-clothes would serve the purpose until he returned home; but his own jacket and trousers would be necessary, since the smaller man's could only be donned as a temporary measure. And while he sat and drank the spirits that Jennifer had poured him, Warner Lidstone considered the meaning of what had happened. He was arriving at a conclusion when Gilyan came down to him, and her grandmother left them alone. She asked his forgiveness and expressed her deep regret that he had saved her.

"By now I should have been at peace," she said, "and you'd have been left with a memory to love instead of a living creature to hate."

"How could you? How could you?" he asked. "I know, of course, that it is something to do with me; but couldn't you have told me? Couldn't you have trusted me? Was that awful thing the only way out?"

"Yes, Warner—the only way to leave you. I'd thought a cruel lot afore I done it, you know that. A woman don't end her life for nothing; but what was left for me but death?"

"How can I tell? I don't know where I stand or where you stand. I can only suppose you wanted to be rid of me and saw no way but that."

"I wanted to spare you; I wanted to save you from making a fearful mistake and wedding me. It was from my great respect to you that I did it. Think how it looked to me. Suddenly, horribly I found out that I was all wrong—all wickedly wrong and didn't love you as I ought and weren't worthy to be the wife of a man like you. Because you'd given me all, and I found out I couldn't give you all. And less than all in love is nought. I was faced with that, and I didn't much want to go on living when I found it out. Because, though life would be good enough, I said to myself, 'What about Warner's honour if I go on living?' And it seemed to me the only way to leave you, and not touch your honour, or make you and yours hate my name for evermore, was to die. And what I went through afore I tried to do it none will ever know; and I don't want 'em to."

She wept and coughed; he turned the steaming garments before the fire. He felt surprised to find himself so calm.

"I think I understand," he said. "You'd best to cheer up now because you've got the credit for what you meant to do—not with the world at large, because there's no call why everybody should know about it; but with those it most concerns. You couldn't marry me and the reason why not we'll come to, because it's got to be faced. But anyway, you found yourself changed and in a state when you didn't love me no more."

"I never loved you like that," she said. "I thought I did. I thought that what I felt for you was the real, everlasting thing; but it wasn't, and when I found it wasn't—how could I dare to tell you? I couldn't, Warner. I could only show you—I couldn't tell you. And there were two ways to show you—one decent and the other indecent—or so it seemed to me; and I took the only decent way."

"I give you credit for that. You see you've got your reward. You've been a very fine heroine, Gilyan; you've eaten your cake and be going to have it too—one of the lucky ones. Oh, yes—I'm not so dull where you're concerned. I can make sacrifices too. Perhaps I will—to reward you.''

''Don't talk like that, for God's sake. You know what I meant to do—simply for honour of you.''

''I know; I see; but I don't understand—not yet. Your honour for me was greater than your love for somebody else. Such things leave me guessing. Who's the man, Gilyan? Who was it you were going to rob at the same time you robbed me?''

She considered. His perception astonished her and saved much anxiety. He even spoke of rewarding her sacrifice. What did that mean? But she felt the matter had gone far enough. It amazed her that seeing so much he did not see all. But perhaps he did see: perhaps he knew that it was Harold Lidstone who had come between them and opened her eyes to the meaning of love.

''I can't talk about that. You musn't ask me, Warner. He always seemed small beside you—yes, he did, God's my judge. His love for me and my love for him seemed small things when I looked at you and thought upon what I had done for you. And I sacrificed him—I'd done it. My part was ended. I'd said 'Good-bye' to him and never thought to see him again. Don't drag him in. Pity him. Think what he's feeling this minute. Think what he knows now—that I put your honour higher even than his love and worship. Gall for him, poor wretch. And do you think he'll get over it? Do you think he'll ever feel the same to me again? I've lost you both as I meant to do—with this bitterness added—that I'm alive to bear it, instead of escaped from it in the water.''

She wept again and her grandmother came in.

''Best take her away,'' said Warner, ''and I'll get on my jacket and breeches and be gone. I understand everything now—everything. I know who the man is now.''

Mrs. Purchase said not a word, but showed a wonder she was far from feeling. With shaking body she supported

Gilyan and led her from the kitchen; then Warner pulled off the garments, that sat so ridiculously upon his tragic figure, and got into his own clothes.

He was about to depart, but a thought struck him and he called Jennifer downstairs.

"Don't lose sight of her again till you see me, or Harold Lidstone in an hour or two. Lock her in her room if that's all you can do, or set 'Frog' to keep his eye on her."

He added the last words inspired by the appearance of Mark Fawden.

"Gilyan's had an accident," he said. "Her foot slipped and she tumbled into the river over head and ears. She's in a very excited state about it and not responsible for the minute. So I'll ask you, Mark, not to let her go out again till I've sent the doctor over—or somebody else as good. Watch her close."

He left them and staggered a little in his going, while the old man turned to Jennifer.

"What the mischief is it?" he asked.

"You needn't be feared," whispered Jennifer. "A fearful thing have happened seemingly; but the worst is over. She's all right. She'll be herself in a minute, now he's gone. The world be on the side of the young."

CHAPTER XII

ALL FRIENDS

Mrs. Lidstone walked across the meadows of Withy Lease on an April day to see Jennifer Purchase.

Some weeks were passed; Harold Lidstone was gone back to London and Gilyan had recovered. Now there came a letter for Mary from her nephew and she desired Jennifer to read it. As for the rest of the world, it was understood that, for private reasons, the engagement between Warner and Gilyan had been broken off.

Jennifer looked more wrinkled and careworn than usual, for the catastrophe came as a heavy blow to her. She had voiced her attitude to Mark Fawden soon after the event.

''At my age you ain't wishful for time to fly as a rule, seeing there's little left at best,'' she said. ''But there's nothing for this but time and I wish to God we was all six months older and knew where we stood.''

Jennifer suspected that something lay behind her granddaughter's immersion and rescue. She could not believe that things were as they appeared, and while in no sense implicating Warner, whom she held as the victim of the disaster, Mrs. Purchase guessed that Harold Lidstone and Gilyan had arrived at an understanding before the business of the river. Gilyan, however, merely confessed that she had tried to drown herself, being under the impression that death was the sole exit with dignity from her unfortunate position.

What other people thought and believed Jennifer did not know; but when she saw a broad print-clad figure in a white sun-bonnet leisurely approaching, the old woman guessed that she was to learn more from Mary Lidstone. She went to the door, her expression open and tentative, prepared to echo the attitude of her neighbour whatever it might prove to be. Mary shook hands and expressed pleasure that sun warmth had tinctured the rainy days.

"Spring offering at last," she said, "and your reed-rond all spearing again, I see."

"So it is then; and I hope and trust the apples trees be looking as you'd have 'em," answered Jennifer.

"They are," answered the other. "A great harvest if the weather's tempered at bud-break. The trees be properly silvered with fruit spurs."

Jennifer dusted a chair and waited for the visitor to speak; but Mary indulged in generalities before producing the letter in her pocket. Her speech, however, bore directly on the future and showed Mrs. Purchase that Mary knew more concerning that than she did.

"You'll be lonely, I'm thinking, afore long," she said.

"No hardship to me," answered Jennifer. "You can't have it both ways, my dear, and a lonely life, such as mine, has got quietness and peacefulness to it. But for the care of poverty, I should soon be without a care if Gilyan was only settled. And peace brings great advantages. If life be full and bustling, like yours, it's all the brighter for relations and friends; but all the sadder for their miseries and troubles. A lonely creature have only got her own troubles anyway; and in my case I find 'em enough."

"There's more to life shared with other people than lived alone, however," argued Mary, "and for that matter, you never were particular lonely with Gilyan. But where there's young people, there's always anxiety and care for the middle-aged ones, and the sins of the fathers be often visited on the grandfathers as well as the children in my experience."

"That's God's truth anyway," declared the ancient gloomily.

"However, I hope, so far as you're concerned, there's light coming, and if I was you I should certainly see in loneliness something better than neighbouring along with your daughter's daughter. I'm not going to pretend to praise her to you, Jennifer, because that would be humbug. It stands like this now. Gilyan made it very clear she was out of bias when she thought she loved Warner, and the reason is here, in black and white, from my nephew, Harold. It's no news, but it's definite and plain. When they met, Gilyan soon found she didn't really love my son, because the feeling woke in her by the tobacconist was far ways deeper and truer. And now Harold tells me again, what he told Warner five minutes before they fished the girl out of the river. He's in love with Gilyan just as much as she is in love with him."

"It's true," admitted Jennifer. "The night after the great picnic to Paignton, Gilyan told me that Harold Lidstone was her god. Them was her words, and I very near brought 'em to you next morning, and I wish I had now."

Mrs. Lidstone produced a letter.

"Read that," she said, "and say if you approve of it. I may tell you that I do. Not that it matters a button what you approve, or what I approve, because this is bound to be. There's nothing like love misunderstood for bringing sorrow in the world, Jennifer. Life's sad enough at best, but who is there that doesn't make it sadder than it need be? We all do—oftener for ignorance than malice. Go as gingerly as we will, we're always treading on other people's corns by reason of our stupidity. We ought to be cleverer by now."

"So far as I can see, the younger generation, for all their schooling, be more selfish and harsh even than us older ones," argued Jennifer.

"Life's the only schoolmaster to soften the heart," said

Mrs. Lidstone, "and not always life. Anyway, knowing so much, it's our place to make allowances and I've come to make 'em; and who begged me to do it? My son. Ah! No selfishness, no sighs for his own sorrow with him. Gilyan Neck thought she loved him, and she thought wrong and, in a word, he doesn't blame her for it, because he holds none has the right to blame. He's very hard hit and it's made him a careworn, twilight sort of a chap for the time; but he's standing up to it and finding work blunt the edge, I hope. And now read what the other chap has to say."

Jennifer fetched her glasses from the kitchen mantelshelf and returned to the parlour, where Mary sat with her hands in her lap.

Harold's letter expressed deep sorrow for the past, then declared that what had happened was all the writer's fault and that he took entire blame for everything. It stated what Harold had already stated to Warner, and vowed again that he had been about to leave Orchard Lands and remove himself for evermore from Gilyan, when the catastrophe occurred. The fiction had been maintained by both liars, and Harold, of course, assumed that it was believed as truth by all concerned. Now, knowing that Warner's engagement had ceased, he asked if he had his aunt's permission to marry Gilyan.

"I would suggest," he wrote, "that she comes to London, to friends of mine, and marries me here as soon as we can be married in my parish. The sooner she is out of Lower Marldon, the better for the peace of my family and her own. For the rest only time can heal the terrible wounds I have been so unfortunate as to inflict."

He rambled on through further pages, but they mattered nothing. His proposal alone demanded Jennifer's attention. She read to the end, dropped the letter on her lap, took off her glasses, screwed up her eyes and then focussed them on Mrs. Lidstone.

"Whether the past is as he tells it, or different, is no odds to anybody but him and your grand-daughter," commented Mary calmly: "the future is what you've got to decide upon, Jennifer. For my part I think what he suggests had better be agreed to. He should have wrote to you, not me; and for that matter he may have done so."

"He wrote to Gilyan, and she wanted for me to read it, but I wouldn't."

"Well, take my advice and say this plan will suit you. Let it go suent * and easy for 'em, and feel, same as I do, that it will be all right. You take Gilyan up to London—that'll be best; and if you want a new gown, give me the pleasure of making you a little present. Between old friends that's nought."

Mrs. Purchase shook her head and reddened under withered cheek.

"No, no, Mary. I'm not so hard up as all that. You be very clever to cloak your charities, my dear, but spare me that, if you please. I'll think as to going up. Not but what I haven't been in London in my time. But I'm none too sure as Gilyan would wish me to go."

Mrs. Lidstone rose and took the letter.

"Well, there it is. I shall tell him that you are Gilyan's lawful guardian and that he'll hear from you, or else her, the answer to this letter. Set about it, Jennifer, and take her up next week."

"She's in a state now when she don't care what becomes of her," said Mrs. Purchase, and the younger smiled.

"Oh, no she isn't. She understands very well what will become of her: don't you fret about that. Gilyan knows the Lord helps those who help themselves."

They talked a little longer and the elder praised Mary; but the other shook her head.

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* *Suent.* Easy, comfortable.

"I'm not in it, Jennifer, and never was in it. There's only one have earned a word of praise in this coil, and that's my son. Good-bye, and mind I'm just so much a friend to you as ever I was."

On the way home, Mary met Warner and told him what she had said to Mrs. Purchase. He was working in the garden, digging in a dressing of manure, and he stopped, left his spade in the earth, put on his coat and went to windward of the acrid vapour steaming from the stable stuff. He was looking anxious and worn, for his trouble had rendered him sleepless, and while escaping from it by day through the channels of very strenuous toil, by night it would not be evaded. The firm ground had fallen from under his feet, and a position that seemed assured on the rock of a great mutual love was suddenly stricken to dust in this earthquake. It came so abruptly, yet with such shattering completeness, that not for a moment could Warner deceive himself. The truth did not ooze to him drop by drop, as to the others interested: it fell like a thunderbolt from a blue sky on his secure hour and left him quite dazed and distracted. But, since there was no shadow of doubt or ray of hope, he was bound to accept the downfall of his fortunes and proceed under the changed conditions. Gilyan, after a fashion, had plotted mercifully as her instinct prompted her, and no doubt her performance and subsequent apparent desperation of mind did serve to lessen the man's sense of suffering wrong. He accepted without question the face value of the entertainment played before him. He believed firmly that Gilyan had tried to destroy herself rather than confess that her love for him was dead. He judged her a victim, like himself, of forces beyond her control; and since Harold had confessed his own situation and declared his intention of departing and seeing neither his cousin nor his cousin's future wife again, Warner, out of a single and honest heart, felt no blame rightly attached to the man. He and

Harold, for the rest of the world, preserved the fiction that Gilyan was alone with her betrothed after Harold had left them, and that the girl had then accidently fallen into the water. But, without gleaning details, all concerned quickly perceived that the truth must have been exceedingly different when, within twenty-four hours of Harold Lidstone's departure, Warner briefly told his mother that he could not marry Gilyan.

She received the news in silence and left him to explain at another time how he had discovered that Gilyan did not love him as she had imagined. She listened without comment, and as he fitfully returned to the theme, learned, little by little, that Harold it was who had awakened passion in the girl, and that Harold loved her as dearly as she loved him.

Mary's consolation and sympathy took scant shape in words. She understood her son exceedingly well. She displayed no emotion and pretended not much sorrow for this harsh experience. To any other ear but his, her impassivity had sounded unsympathetic; but he translated her silence and thought no worse of her because she blamed not Gilyan at all. Her heart was full enough for him, but it never ran over, and he soon knew, by certain signs, that she did not regard his disappointment as a grief without alloy. She took his arm now, brought him homeward with her, and told him of Harold's letter and her advice to Mrs. Purchase. He listened and then admitted that it was well.

"It's fitting that she should go to him," he declared—"best for them both—and for us."

She pressed his arm gently.

"I'm proud of your sense and your patience, Warner," she said. It was her first direct, intimate expression of sympathy for his loss, and the man nodded.

"What must be must," he answered. "Life's got to go on and luck's beyond our winning. At times like this, I incline a bit to Paul Neck and that baggering old poacher, Septimus Wedlake.''

He gave a short laugh. He was assuming a cynical attitude foreign to his real nature, but she did not trouble to argue against it, well knowing that not a shadow of consolation for his bent of mind offered from that direction. He would soon drop even the pretence of indifference, for Warner could not pretend.

After supper that night, moved by an impulse which he imparted to nobody, the young man went out, strolled up the valley, and dropped in as of old at Withy Lease. How often on a dark night the bead of fire from that window had drawn him over the meadows! But this was the last time. He had sat with Gilyan once since the departure of Harold; but he had not seen her after their engagement was broken. And now, to the surprise of all three, Warner strolled in, where Mark Fawden sat by the fire smoking, Jennifer mended stockings opposite him, and Gilyan read at the table with her back turned to the others.

The visitor ignored their surprise, doubt and confusion. He preserved a pleasant mien, saluted all in friendship, and turned his attention first to the elders.

''I hear your frogs croaking tonight, Mark,'' he began. ''That means spring.''

They chatted amiably and Jennifer, from an air of humble uneasiness, became more confident. She knew that he had only come to see Gilyan and presently, when Warner asked the girl what she was reading, Mrs. Purchase signed to Mark. Making some pretext he rose and departed, wishing all ''good-night'' before he did so. Then Jennifer put up her work, asked the man if he would drink, and when he declined, she also took her leave.

''Bolt home the door and put out the lamp when Mr. Lidstone goes, Gilyan,'' she said, then lighted her candle and crept away.

For a little while the divided pair were silent; then she answered his last question.

"I wasn't reading. I'd only opened a book to keep gran' from talking to me. She goes over the same thing again and again till my brain throbs and my heart aches. She's losing her memory, I expect."

"Lucky old woman!"

"I expect so. When you're up as old as her, there's more it's good to forget than be worth remembering, no doubt."

"Gilyan," he said, "I want to tell you where I stand now. For your peace of mind I came out tonight to say it. I do hope, very much indeed, that what you feel for Harold is the true wondrous thing beyond any chance of mistaking. And I think it is, without a doubt. I'm sure he's got a great, abiding love for you, and he did nothing dishonourable or base about it. I've come to see that love doesn't always wake up love, and though you thought you loved me honestly enough, you never knew the meaning or size of the word till you met him. And meeting him opened your eyes to the gap betwixt love and liking. Your mistake was to try and take that terrible way out; and, thank the watching Lord, it was just me and him, of all men, who were sent to save you for such a wicked thing. The past shall be past and nobody need ever know anything about that. And I think now that the sooner you and your grandmother can go up to London, the better. And there's no shadow in my mind no more against you, or him. Grasp that, Gilyan. I shall think kindly about you both and wish you very well. So go to him untroubled, and remember as long as I live I shall count myself your friend and Harold's friend."

"You'll live to be thankful," she said. "I never was good enough, or big-minded enough for you. If I had been, I should have loved you. And I do love you. There's love and love. I love you different from what he made me love him. He didn't try to—I don't mean that. He never made love; but he was just himself; and being like that, I had to love him. And I love you too, Warner. God's my judge, I love you—for your amazing forgiveness and your goodness—so well as I shall ever love him. But it's different, somehow. It's a different sort of love. But it won't sleep; it won't grow faint. It will keep an abiding, everlasting thing; and if it's my blessed luck at any time to do anything to serve you, I shall be thankful. You're the best man ever I saw, or be like to see; and I thank you on my knees for saying you'll be my friend."

"That's all right. Don't you think about me no more. You get up to London, and I hope and believe you'll be a prosperous woman, Gilyan."

She took his hand and kissed it. She was crying now and her young body shaking with very genuine grief.

He patted her shoulder, reached for his hat, and got up to go.

"All the very best I wish you," he said; "and never you think of your old home with a sigh, only with happiness. Us'll hear about you and Harold come presently."

"Kiss me," she begged.

"Why not? Cousins, now."

He touched her temple with his lips, looked for a moment cheerfully into her eyes, and then was gone.

"Good-bye and God bless you," she cried out into the darkness after him.

And then Jennifer, hidden at the corner of the landing above stairs, came down after Gilyan had shut the door.

"All friends?" she asked.

"I love him better than anybody on earth," sobbed the maiden. "He's too good for this world, I reckon, and a damned sight too good for any woman in it."

"Go to bed," answered Jennifer. "If he's let you out, like the nice man he is, don't use crooked words, but thank your Maker you've got such a friend still. Us'll trapse up to London next week, after Miss Blake have turned my dandy-go-risset gown and I've got a new bonnet from somewheres.''

Gilyan still wept.

''Have you got mo—mo—mother's pearl brooch I was promised when I ma—married?''

''Yes, you shall have it. I'll look it out tomorrow.''

Elsewhere, tramping through the night-hidden land to the love croak of invisible frogs, Warner found his fine enthusiasm and forgiveness turn bitter upon his soul. The thing was done, the excitement over, the girl's facile tears wept. Only now the residue of fact left after these emotions stared him in the face—remorseless, irrevocable. She was gone. Her very gratitude already seemed thin and sour.

CHAPTER XIII

PROMISE

A FEW gnarled patriarchs persisted in the groves of Orchard Lands by Mary Lidstone's will, because they had known the ancient rites of "christening" and were associated in her mind with men and women long dead. Around them stood trees in full vigour of life and splendour of bearing; and the aged and adult mingled with the young maidens, who promised to give their first fruits during the year. Hope breathed from the glory of late May; hearts of men beat braver for all this music and colour.

A million petals gleamed and red buds sparkled; sun-lances darted everywhere; the song of the birds did not drown the undersong of glimmering, gauze-winged things busy in every open flower about the vital matter of honey and bee-bread.

Beneath the orchards extended a carpet woven of many greens and sunlight dappled with spring flowers. The daisy, the buttercup, the stitch-wort touched Mary Lidstone's feet, while she walked with Matthew among the trees; and where the orchard sloped to a hazel hedge, great snow-white umbel-bearers and burdocks prospered with the golden green of uncurling lady ferns; nettles broke not unbeautiful in grey against the emerald; and huge, cool shadows of delicate purple fell upon the living carpet and made a soft gloom through the regiments of the tree stems. The trunk sprang upward at all angles, of all shapes, inscribed with every fantastic lichen-word that the west wind writes on ancient barks. In tones of ripe and mossy green, of silver-brown and silver-grey, their boughs stood forth crowned with light. The branches struck out abruptly to spring aloft, then droop and twist earthward again; they traced patterns heavy and stark upon winter skies, but were now lost in opening leaf and bloom. Their forms were partly hidden at this hour and their wonderful harmonies and reticulations of line softened in verdure and wreathed with flowers.

The apple-blossom, under direct sunshine, was alive with pure light and blue shadow; for petal shade, thrown on petal, created the illusion of azure woven into every cluster of ivory and ruby mingled. They were jewels, only fading as the pageant receded, from its wealth of detail close at hand, to a chastened and dimmer splendour seen afar. The atmosphere brought its own magic, came between, made its presence felt, touched leaf-mass and blossom-mass, brought all together and melted every line and curve in a medium of glowing air. Against this curtain gleamed the insects, drawing little threads of golden fire athwart it in their swift flight; the breezes moved the lazy leaves to let the sunbeams through; tiny galaxies of little suns were thus mirrored on the grass; black birds sang—the sole bird-song that seems to have a soul in it; chaffinches, busy at their home in apple trees, sent petals fluttering to earth as wings touched fading blossoms. Each twinkle of snow through the green proclaimed that an infant apple had entered upon existence and cast off long clothes forever.

Early fruits were already setting and the latest trees still held their buds tight clenched, denying the smile of May, and waiting for the command of June to fulfil their destiny.

The sun made a glory of each grass-blade and the very heart-beat of spring seemed to throb through all growing things, until a recipient spirit might see the lush, sugary blood coursing under bark and rind by secret fountains upward to every leaf, to every knob of buds, to the last, tender, scarce-defined calyx that hid a coming flower. Such phenomena Mary Lidstone never failed, though in unconscious fashion, to appreciate; and so witnessed the personality of her orchards awakening and stretching hands to her from the trees great and small. She responded with a deep instinct and her life came a little way to touch these unconscious lives and mingle with them in harmony at the hour of spring. They entered the portals of each other's being; their joys and sorrows seemed not hidden from each other; the woman oftentimes had won comfort from the companionship of these grey ministrants even as they won comfort from her.

Now she went quietly with her eyes aloft.

"Brave blooth!" she said.

"And safe now," asserted Mr. Fawden.

"Never safe, Matt. Never safe till it's in the basket. Safe from weather, I grant; but that's only the first danger."

"Us haven't had much grub about since we took to white-washing."

" 'Tis always on the lookout. Greedy, unborn, many-footed things will burrow in the fruit and gain their food and defeat ours if we let 'em. However, no need to cast you down."

"There ain't," he admitted. "I never was a hopeful man, because hope's a silly practice and only leads to disappointment most times; but even I feel we've got a 'mazing crops in the making this year. We can't escape it—not that I feel any call to shout; but there it is; and there it ought to be: a bumper's long over-due."

"Why for should it be due—as if it was a right and not a boon?" she asked curiously.

"Because we've worked for it and we deserve it—every man jack of us," answered Matthew. "There's no orchards in the county be treated better, or more generous, or with more sweat and greater understanding than our orchards; and if such work and wit don't deserve harvests above our neighbours, then what's the meaning of justice?''

''Nature answers quick enough to our work.''

''If let alone, she do,'' admitted the old master. ''I've no quarrel with nature so long as she's orderly and keeps her head and her temper, so to say; but she's like a lot of you human women—not trustworthy. We can lock up our fellow creatures if they trick and chouse us; but there's no cure for the dishonesty of nature. You can't take nature into court when she slips a bit of January into May and freezes the opening bud and behaves like a drunken whore on a spree. And that's why you never hear me waste curses on her bad behaviour, nor yet blessings on her good moods. She don't send this harvest to please us—I know that as well as you—and you can't pretend no particular friendship for somebody you've got to be fighting for your living three parts of the time.''

Mary laughed.

''She's got our lives as well as our living in her hands, Matt.''

''Granted; and there again, if you think of it, as I have, it's all the running of a machine, and she visits the sins of the fathers on the children and never puts a finger to save us from ourselves. We reap what our forbears sowed, evil or good. We've got to bend to that; but it ain't nothing to be thankful for.''

''Our Maker's stronger than nature, however. There's a tidy lot to thank Him for.''

''I agree,'' replied Matthew promptly. ''My friend, Paul Neck, don't; but there I'm at odds with Paul. A very grateful man, am I, to God, and quick as lightning to thank Him for a real good turn, as we all should be. When Gilyan Purchase went back on your son, I saw Providence in it, same as, no doubt, you did. That was a case when nature tried all it knew to land Warner with a parlous terror that would have brought him to awful misfortunes very like and been the death-knell to these orchards in another generation. But the Lord said 'No. That man shan't be no victim'; and so He sent Harold Lidstone and saved us all and gave nature the go by."

Two women approached and Matthew pointed to one of them.

"That's the female I want to see my master take, if the line's got to be handed on."

Lucy and Betsy appeared together and Mrs. Lidstone awaited them, while the man went his way among the trees.

"Look in at the press, ma'am, afore you go back to the house," he said, and then was gone.

Betsy had come to dinner and brought news, for she had been to London; but the nature of her information appeared doubtful in one pair of ears and the girls now came to Lucy's mother to learn what should, or should not be said.

"Of course she's seen Gilyan, and I tell her that she'd better not mention her name afore Warner; but Betsy isn't too sure," explained Mrs. Lidstone's daughter.

"Be natural," answered Mary. "Talk of her just as you might talk of anybody else. Warner will want to know about her, and it's no good pretending he will not. By leaving her out of your adventures, you'll only keep her uppermost in his thoughts all the time. He's always honest and never pretends he's not greatly interested in her and her future. So just name her without any fuss."

"Easy enough to do," answered Betsy. "She's settled in to the manner born, so Mr. Lidstone said. She loves the shop and she loves London and she's improved the business, because people come in for the pleasure of looking at her. She's lovelier than ever; but she's rapidly getting very large ideas about money. She sees it come over the counter and forgets that there's a lot to be took out of it before you come to profits. That's what I know and she does not, because father very soon made that clear to my mind years ago. And Harold's trying to make it clear to Gilyan."

"They got on all right?" asked Lucy.

"Amazing well. Regular lovers, you may say. I preached sense to 'em; but they haven't reached the stage to hear yet. Every night, when they close, off they go for a bit of fun somewhere. Gilyan's the pleasure-loving sort and just glories in everything."

"The man's master, I hope?" asked Mary.

"I wouldn't say that. It's too soon to tell. You might call it the honeymoon still going on. He dotes on her and won't deny her ought he can afford—that's certain."

At dinner Warner returned and Betsy Neck related the incidents of her fortnight's visit to London. She told of Harold and his wife, without more detail than concerning other people, and preserved a pleasant and humorous note of description. He asked a shy question or two and then, perceiving that Betsy thought it not strange he should do so, inquired further of the life of his married cousin. Betsy could not fail to see how the one subject that really interested him was Gilyan. He proved too ingenuous to hide it; and Mary's heart grew soft for her son before this manifestation. She felt no surprise, only regret that it should still be so. Lucy spoke, after Warner was gone back to work.

"He's like a ghost about everything in life till you name her name," she said; "then you feel he's solid flesh and blood again."

"It's better he should show it than hide it," replied her mother. "It will wear out."

"If he goes on loving her as long as I go on hating her, 'twill be a lengthy business," grumbled Lucy; and then they resumed an interminable argument that always found Betsy and Mary's daughter in opposition. For Gilyan's cousin would never consent to believe that Harold's wife and he had plotted to deceive and create any false impression in Warner's mind; while Lucy, who had never forgiven either of them after the meeting on Windmill Hill, vowed that Gilyan and her husband planned the whole matter. The unprofitable subject left each girl unconvinced. They roamed the orchards after dinner and picked bluebells; then Warner joined them and they strolled to the press house, which had been thrown open that day to let the air in. Since the last harvest this chamber had remained closed, but now the great doors hung wide, fringed with shattered cobwebs; while from within came the faint perfume of last year's cider—an incense whose fragrance still hung about the gloomy interior. Through a velvety murk gleamed one pillar of light—the great steel screw of the press; and the sunshine of afternoon explored the sombrous place with fingers of gold upon granite trough, mighty oaken beam of the press and other ripe, rich timbers and metal vessels round about.

"Mother will have the presses aired come summer, for she says their darkness makes for dry rot," explained Lucy. "A terrible one for light she is: always sleeps with her blinds up."

Betsy kept a great piece of personal news until tea-time and then related a discovery made upon her return home.

"No surprise of course," she said. "We've all been expecting it for about two years I'm sure; yet now that it has actually come and the autumn is fixed for it——"

"Your father and Mrs. Woodley?"

"Yes. He's got her to say somewhere after Michaelmas. They can't decide where to go for a honeymoon. Sarah's all for Plymouth. She says that she always finds sitting on a pier looking at the sea the most restful thing in nature. But father thinks that would be rather tame. He says that neither of them will ever have a honeymoon again and that the most did ought to be made of it."

"I've heard about it from Matthew and also from James Woodley," explained Mary. "Matthew, who is a great disciple of your father, Betsy, thinks that this is the only foolish thing Mr. Neck ever did in his life; but such an old bachelor as Matt counts very little, and no doubt, as usual, he'll live to see he was wrong. I like Sarah Woodley very much myself. She's made of sense, and so's your father, and they be doing a very clever thing, in my opinion, to wed."

"James Woodley isn't so sure, however," said Lucy. "He feels a doubt whether two such strong characters may not strike sparks sometimes. He thinks it is going to be flint and steel, and that very likely they'll dent each other a bit."

"That's how youth might look at it," admitted Mrs. Lidstone; "but you young people don't know that good characters get the mellow softness of wisdom after middle age. They won't dent each other, nor yet strike sparks."

"So I think," answered Betsy, "and 'tis a thousand pities that Jimmy and me can't fall in love with each other and round it all suent and easy. But Jimmy explained to me, with many words, that he couldn't feel drawn to such a dark coloured woman as I am. He was full of apologies about it, poor chap, and I told him I quite understood and didn't think none the worse of him."

They laughed at the spectacle of the horseman seeking to atone for his indifference to Betsy's charm.

"You must forgive him," said Mrs. Lidstone, "for in truth he's a good bit worried. Sarah's got a sure feeling that the house will come to ruin when she leaves it, if James don't go and live there with a wife. Left alone, she says he'd let it drop over his head, so little does he understand; but she tells me there's a conviction in her mind that James must marry, and she won't be entirely happy herself until he has."

"They're rather bullying him about it," explained Betsy. "Father's as bad as Mrs. Woodley, and he makes her urge him on behind the scenes. But it's dangerous ground to suggest, because Jimmy says that the moment he's invited to consider this woman or that, then he instantly turns against her. He feels it's a business where the man did ought to hunt on his own, and there's no charm if somebody else finds the game for you."

"Mind you," cut in Warner, who had returned and listened to this conversation, "James is quite a good bargain for any average girl in his own position. He's healthy and hearty, and if he's not lively, he's sensible and would make a very steadfast sort of husband. But you can't drive a man of his age into matrimony."

"He's seeking, however," said Lucy. "He's measuring up Clara Toms, our cook, at present; but I'm very much afraid he won't do anything in that quarter. I can't be sure, because Clara is the most impossible woman to know in the world. You might live with her a hundred years and not get to what she really thinks and feels and wants. But since that business with young Bulley, your potman's nephew, at 'Church House,' Clara has gone against men altogether."

They agreed that James ought not to be driven in this important matter, were sorry for him and laughed kindly at the eccentric man, even while expressing sympathy. Then Betsy went on her way home and Warner, bound for Higher Marldon, accompanied her.

CHAPTER XIV

MR. WOODLEY'S FUTURE

James Woodley was discussing his own affairs with Arthur Partridge. The latter, now definitely engaged to be married, felt himself by this achievement Jimmy's superior and he offered his advice in rather a lofty tone. Partridge was by nature of a disposition prone to patronise where possible, and from his own assured status he presumed to treat his comrade in a spirit more pitying than patient. He discussed the cook at Orchard Lands as a possible mate for his companion.

"Clara's a nice sort of woman," said Arthur. "She's not for all markets and I couldn't stand her temper myself; but a good head on her shoulders and, for a man like you, that would rather follow than lead, she might be all right enough."

"I'd follow in some things," admitted James, "but not in all. In the matter of home, I'd leave the place to her judgment, because she'd keep it water-sweet and have got an eye, like my mother's, to see where a thing wants doing. I never see if paint's lacking, or a tile be loose, or a herb dead in the garden and so on, though always very willing to make good when a disaster be pointed out to me. And I wouldn't say she's got a temper in any bad sense. She knows what she owes to herself; but that's not a fault. And the woman who is my wife would find I paid her all proper respect both in and out of company. Then, against any such little thing, is her cooking; and with a queasy stomach like mine, that often goes back on me when I least expect it, her food would be a tower of strength."

"That's where the danger lies," explained Partridge. "She's a great and steadfast cook, for I've heard missis say so. 'Clara's not a heaven-born wonder,' Mrs. Lidstone said in my hearing, not knowing I was round the corner, 'but she knows no shadow of changing. She can be trusted to do the same thing from day to day, and I'll forgive pleasant surprises in a cook if you never have no unpleasant ones.' Those were Mrs. Lidstone's words, and with a masterpiece like that, my fear for you is that if you were to rise up and take her away from Orchard Lands, you wouldn't be forgiven very easily."

James reflected on this aspect of the case.

"If my marriage were to unseat the missis, 'twould be a bad beginning," he admitted. "I stand very high here and, without puffing myself, I deserve to do so; but if they went and made a personal thing of Clara Toms going——"

"There's another side, too. You ain't sure, I believe, whether she'd have you yet."

"Certainly I am not. I'm only turning it over. I don't much like her as a woman; but my feeling is that there's a very fine wife in Clara, and there's such a general opinion in the air I ought to be married that, given a good partner, it would happen."

"You're wrong," answered Arthur. "A wife ain't like a tool, fit for any hand that knows how to use it. Because Clara might be a clever sort of wife for one man, it don't follow she'd be a successful wife for any man. Take Miss Nosworthy, engaged to marry me. For me she will be a successful sort of wife, because I understand her and know her strength and her weakness. I know when to ride her on the curb and when to let go. Another man might fail for want of brain power with Miss Nosworthy. The love that's blind is not worth a damn with a girl like that; but my love ain't blind—it's all-seeing, and the result will be good, because she knows my judgment is better than hers and goes deeper. You can't, as you seem to think, suffer the woman to boss the house and still find yourself the boss of the woman. It's a lot easier to let your power slip away than get it back once it's gone, and with your nature, that can't put a foot down on a worm, your wife did ought to be of the meek and mild order if you are to keep the man's place over her. And never was Clara known to be meek and mild, nor yet any other professed cook."

"I don't want a humble one. They meek and mild women get on my nerves," declared James. "They'm easy to manage, but so often as not you've got to manage everything else as well, and they'll often wriggle out of their own proper work, because they say man must be master and so on. They'll make a man think he's a very fine fellow, and all the time they're laughing at him and amusing themselves, when they did ought to be at work. They meek women are often devilish cunning, Arthur. They give you best in all things no doubt; but a man like me would get tired of praise. Them women who like to spend all their time in their husband's laps and let him do all the work, ain't no good as wife, nor yet mother."

"I don't believe you'm particular wishful to be married at all," asserted Partridge.

"On my own account I wouldn't say I am; but my mother and Paul Neck——"

"See 'em in hell, Jimmy! Who ever heard of a grown man drove into marriage to suit other people? Let your house to some trustworthy person, and tell Neck you'll marry when it suits your convenience and not a darned hour sooner. Don't you bend to no tyrants though they are your relations."

"It's too late to take any line like that. I'm not against marriage. If the right one was to come along, I'd go into it very well content; but my feeling is that you did ought to let nature take its course. Marriages are made in heaven, according to the old saying, and there wouldn't be the saying if there weren't some truth in it. Very well then—leave it to Heaven's appointed time. The woman's somewhere without a doubt, and us Woodleys ban't meant to die out. I'd be a sure foal-getter, I expect."

Arthur considered.

"I know you feel very impatient with silly people who name names to you," he said, "and quite right to be with a man like your future step-father, who's got an axe to grind in the matter and wants to see you booked, and don't care a blue-bottle who it is; but I'm different. I've drawn a prize myself and I'd rather see you with a prize than a blank. And not so long ago I got acquainted with a very fine girl, a friend of Miss Nosworthy's. However, if you'd rather I didn't tell you nothing about her, I won't."

"If Miss Nosworthy thinks well of the woman, there's a reason," replied James, "because I expect she wouldn't make a friend of a poor fashion creature."

"She would not," declared Arthur. "In a word, it's Melinda Wedlake, and I wouldn't say such a man as you could do better."

"That baggering old poacher's darter?"

"Old Sep Wedlake's child I grant; but she's told Minnie—Miss Nosworthy—that when she marries, she's going to drop her family. She's far too proud to have any more truck with them after marriage. She's a bit cast-down because of her father's ill fame, but in herself she's all right, and a very fine woman with good intellects."

"'Twould be a great lift up for any darter of Septimus Wedlake's to marry me," said James; "but since your young woman has a high opinion of Melinda Wedlake, I'll think twice. What them of your own generation think in a matter of this sort may be worth turning over; but what I won't endure is advice from the older people."

"Do you know her?" asked Partridge, and Jimmy replied that he did not.

"Only by sight," he answered, "and my eye have never hung on her. I don't hold much with Wedlake, of course;

but I've heard Paul Neck, at the 'Church House,' say the man is not so black as he's painted. No doubt he says that because Wedlake always agrees with him; but, be it as it will, one didn't ought to let the sins of the fathers punish the children."

"Exactly so: keep an open mind. My intended will bring you acquainted with her, if you like."

But James thought such a plan too definite.

"Better I keep the back door open for escape, if I find I can't stomach her," he said. "I'll work it through her father, perhaps, or better still, through Betsy Neck. She knows the young lady and might plot so as us should fall into talk some day as though by accident. I've reached a stage in this affair now when I'm only going to consider one party, Arthur; and that's myself."

"Quite right. I done the same."

"My fear is that Wedlake would poke his nose in and want to get something out of it," continued James, but Partridge saw no cause for alarm in this direction.

"She knows her father only too well. If she was suited, she'd take very good care you wasn't pestered by her relations. For that matter there's only two, and you'd escape having a mother-in-law. In my case I shall have one; but Mrs. Nosworthy is a good bit set on me and won't never be a thorn in my flesh. However, taking it all round, the men without 'em be best off. And as for Melinda herself, she's every bit as smart as 'Cheat-the-Boys' was, and a darned sight straighter. She's only marking time for somebody she can rely upon, and I should reckon you might count yourself a winner. Anyway, I'd back you."

"Who's after her, I wonder," mused Woodley.

"That I couldn't tell you. She's not a great talker."

"I don't want another disappointment. To be turned down once was very bad for my self-respect, same as it was for yours; but if it happened again——"

"Miss Nosworthy can sound her, if you like."

"On no account. I'll just bide at a distance and get a general idea about her. There shan't be no rushing it on either side."

"That'll be the best way," admitted Partridge, "and don't have nothing to do with her father, nor yet her aunt, until you're sure of your ground. If she finds you're the right one, she'll take them in hand short and sharp; and if you are not, then no harm done."

CHAPTER XV

THE DOG-FANCIER

WARNER LIDSTONE and his mother were walking together through the orchards. It was only at such times that the man ever found himself in the mood of confidence; but she comforted him, if he gave her an opportunity, and marked with judgment the moment when a word might best be spoken. She never touched the past until he had done so; and if he did, she noticed that it was always when they were together without companions and under the sky. She knew almost to a moment by a preliminary silence that he was going to speak of Gilyan, and she never bade him dismiss her from his thoughts, but always listened and answered where it seemed good to answer.

She noticed that he returned to the subject of his great disappointment more seldom, and sometimes a week or ten days might pass without a melancholy word from him; but today, towards evening, she met him on his way to Higher Marldon and went slowly along with him to the outer gate. He was going to sup with Paul and Betsy at 'Church House.'

"I'm in a mind not to go," he said. "I don't feel much like it tonight. It's queer, mother. It's the same as it was when father died. For a bit after, sometimes I'd go whole days, or a week, without thinking much about him; then the fact that he was really gone would drive home hour after hour till I was distracted. And then the trouble faded and a cloud would come up over it for a while. So it is with her—Gilyan. For the last few days, though it's all such old history now, I've been wanting her more than ever I did when I had her."

"That's life. Only time can cure it."

"And only time can cure life, I reckon."

She hesitated and felt inward regret. She had thought he was past these stages of emotional blankness. She had listened to Lucy, who, over-sanguine, already whispered that Warner was showing a little more interest in Betsy. But today, though now bound for Betsy and her father, he seemed far in spirit from normal resignation.

"Our mourning and our sorrow are often far worse for us than the things we sorrow about," she said. "To have lost Gilyan may mean a blessing for her—remember that—just as much as in the long run, it may mean a blessing for you. You mustn't fret your nerves too much about it, because that will do you harm and lessen your usefulness."

"I work against that. I know it's wrong to let your own personal experiences decide your judgment about things. It's wrong, but it's natural, for the things that happen to us must make more of a mark on the mind than the things that happen to other people. It was all so fine and wonderful and beautiful to me. And it all seemed so real till I found it was not. Strange that life, that never seemed so real as in those few weeks, was really all a sham."

"False dawns are often more beautiful than the true," said Mrs. Lidstone. "I, that have seen a thousand of both, can say that. The fore-glow can be a magic thing, and the true sunrise, after the magic's over, will often seem lifeless and chill enough. But one is the ghost of dayspring; t'other broadens out into living light."

He nodded.

"There's a great confusion of thoughts in my mind," he said, "and no doubt I'm still a bit haunted. Haunted by the ghost of a ghost, mother, for of course there was nothing real about the whole matter, except what I felt for her. And a curious thing: what makes it hardest to forget is that there's nothing to forgive. D'you understand that? If she'd been hard and selfish and brutal about it and just flung off to one who promised more than I could, then I'd have felt as any other man might—that I'd escaped a worthless girl who might have ruined my life soon or late. But I've no comfort of that sort. She's all I thought her every way, save in the one vital thing of love for me. She's a wonder really, built on lines a good bit above the average woman. For how many would destroy themselves—not because they loved a man—but only because they'd told him they did, and felt so much for his honour?"

"It's stale to go over all that now. And you mustn't be angry with those who don't see it quite in the same light."

"Not I. I don't often think about it. It's getting dimmer."

"That's to the good. You'll be in with reality tonight along with Paul and his daughter."

"You like her well—I know that."

"I do then. There's no girl, after Lucy, I like better. She's a clever woman—clever and warm-hearted both."

"Yet nobody ever cared so much for Gilyan as she did."

"That's true, Warner. Betsy was a loyal and a precious friend for Harold's wife, and still she is. Gilyan's got a deal to thank her for."

"I shall always feel kind to Betsy Neck, and interested in her, too, if it is only for that. She said some very sensible things to me at the time."

"She's made of sense. But you know all I think of her."

They talked until the gate was reached and passed. Then Mary Lidstone gave her son certain messages for Paul Neck and left him at a cottage door in the village. He proceeded through the gloaming and presently climbed to Higher Marldon. A kind welcome always awaited Warner at 'The Church House,' for Neck still hoped that the apple-grower might be his son-in-law and felt quite as desirous to see Betsy happily married, as Sarah Woodley did in the matter of James, her son. Mr. Neck's metaphysical mind and affection for abstract problems was not to Warner's taste as a rule; for his own mental endowment did not extend far beyond personal experience into principles or conclusions. But tonight he found that Betsy's father had a soothing side. The bar was empty save for Paul and Matthew Fawden; and Mr. Neck invited the visitor first to drink, next to consider an interesting subject.

He poured out an appetiser, to excite Warner's hunger for the coming supper, and then he declared that a problem occupied the mind of his friend and himself.

"Matt can't solve it and more can't I," said Paul Neck. "And more won't you, Warner; because it's one of them natural puzzles where only nature could throw light; but she don't. There's a lot of things like that, and if you pursue them to find out the clue of the mystery, they often lead, straight or roundabout, into the ways of nature; and then you lose them. A thing happens and nature wills it so to be; but why it happens—that lies hid with her, and we've got no way to strip the truth bare. You tell Warner, Matthew."

Mr. Fawden was used to brevity.

"It's this way," he answered. "Paul holds that to cut down and destroy makes the heart harder than to build up and create new life. He says that you'll find a butcher harder-hearted than a breeder, and that, if it is only working up an apple tree and training it in the way it should go, building is work where a good heart should feel more content and pleasure than in smashing and hacking and destroying. You want both sorts of men, but Paul here says the builder up should be wiser and gentler and more like to have good will than the caster down."

"Killing makes the heart hard," explained Mr. Neck.

"There's something harsh even in a woodman whose job is to kill the trees; but planting and rearing the young growing things is work that did ought to leave its mark for good on the man that does it. Take shepherds: they be nearly always gentle men."

"And yet," continued Matthew, "what do we find? No sooner has this man said these things, than I confound him. It ought to be as he says; but take me and my twin brother, and then you see how facts run counter to our ideas and nature laughs at our wisdom."

Warner guessed what Matthew was coming to.

"You mean that while your business is to build up and plant and tend growing things, yet you are as hard as a flint, Matthew, despite your life's work?"

"So I am then. My outlook is hard, and I see no particular hope offering for mankind. I build the trees and do my task so well as it can be done; but it don't breed no good will in me; and then if you look at 'Frog,' my brother—what do you find?"

The publican replied.

"You find a man whose business is to chop and chop and cut down; and for a large hope in the future and trust in human nature and good will to his fellow man he's got no equal. And so what sounded a likely truth comes to confusion, because the moment I'd put it to him, Matthew was able to contradict me."

"Matt and Mark are the exception that prove the rule I expect," declared Warner, who felt no interest whatever in the argument; but Mr. Neck would not admit this.

"There's no rule there," he said. "'Tis just one of my ideas that ain't got no anchor in truth. It looked hopeful; but now 'tis gone."

"Not but what more of your ideas are true than false," declared Matthew. "You go deep into it, and when you be beating through your mind, you be known to flush more than game sometimes."

Warner, bored by the old men, sought Betsy, and presently Matthew Fawden went his way while Paul joined his daughter and their visitor at supper. The innkeeper desired nothing better than that Mary Lidstone's son should turn from his disappointment to Betsy; but he was cautious and, when Sarah Woodley debated the problem, saw no outlet for hope. That Betsy esteemed the young man's frank and honest nature and valued his friendship, her father knew; but he also knew the height and depth of Warner's grief and suspected that it would be a matter, possibly of years, before he found himself in a state to welcome consolation.

He never hesitated to contradict Betsy on the subject of Gilyan and did so now as conversation drifted to her.

"In matters of life, you've got to take the long view," said Paul. "My girl was always very addicted to your cousin's wife—Gilyan Lidstone, I mean—and Betsy takes the short view, which is often the hopeful way. But character must have elbow room to declare itself and I never will be hopeful about her. The knack of getting your own way every time is a sign of cleverness no doubt; but it's a sort of cleverness that comes back on itself soon or late; because you can't have anything for nothing. Gilyan makes it look easy to conquer; but that's only if you take the short view of her."

"She never thought of such things. It wasn't selfishness nor yet cleverness," argued Betsy; "it was just nature."

"Don't interrupt: let me flow on," replied her father. "That's the way with you women; you will break in on an argument and snap the thread and spoil all. I say the cost have got to be paid for every act, and whether it was her nature, or her craft don't matter: the long sight sees the price. I'm not blaming her and there's no call to defend anybody against me, because I only throw light where

I can. I never blame anybody. But all I say is that the price goes with everything. Humans don't mostly break out through wickedness, but ignorance. We break faith, or wrong our fellow creatures, a thousand ways, like a little child stealing apples—because he don't understand the apples belong to somebody else. But when it comes to the reckoning, you'll find it's no use pleading ignorance, because the laws of life take no count of it. The consequence have got to follow from the way each of us is built, and character carries its own price every time. Don't think I'm particular glad that is so, Warner; I only tell you the fact, and the fact often seems very cruel and hard when you see it working out. Folk often are in sad trouble so long after they sowed the seeds of it, that we cry out against Providence for a heartless wretch and forget how the suffering people are only reaping what they sowed, or their forbears sowed for 'em. And yet again, if we could look back far enough, we should see the sufferers were bound to sow just that seed and no other, as surely as a plant must fruit according to his fertilising. So there's no blame no way. And yet they tell me now-a-days that certain busy men, who would like to see humans grown from good seed, instead of mostly bad, are set down as lunatics by other folk."

Betsy drew conversation to shallower channels.

"D'you know what I've done, Warner? I've gone and introduced your horseman, Mrs. Woodley's son, to Melinda Wedlake. I hope you don't mind; but poor James wanted to know her, and just as he was telling me that he would like to get acquainted, along came Melinda with a lot of little spaniel puppies she was walking out for her father. Dinky dears—the puppies, I mean; and I took the chance and left James with her. She's a very good girl and has seen enough of what father calls 'the price.' She's seen the price in her home, because Mr. Wedlake's always more or less in a mess; and when Melinda marries, she won't have no patience with anything shifty or uncertain."

"Character again," declared Paul. "Septimus Wedlake's the fairest minded man you'll find, and if you listen to him, you'll always see his own point of view. He never outruns the constable, or does a deed not well within morals and justice—according to himself. Then why is it he's always up against his fellow creatures? Because, unfortunately, his own point of view is so terrible different from theirs. But Melinda don't want to examine the laws and inquire why they be made: she only asks to keep 'em; and she's seen such a lot of trouble come from her father's big mind, that she'll take darned good care to marry a man with a little one."

"So Jimmy ought to suit her very well," said Mr. Neck's daughter. "You wouldn't mind if he was married, would you, Warner?"

Lidstone considered for a moment.

"Of course not. His wife won't have much to worry about, anyway. He's one of the old-fashioned sort, as you know, and none the worse for that. I'm sure I hope they may like each other. But Miss Wedlake won't have a very lively time with him."

"She's had her lively time," answered Betsy, "and the liveliness was not of her making. She's out for peace, and James ought to be the very sign of peace. She's turned down more than one young man just for that reason, because their view of life was too lively for her."

Paul returned to his bar presently and Warner chatted with the woman. She had a great item of news, yet doubted whether it would hurt or please him. He was frank with her and always felt comfortable in her company. She knew all there was to know about him and he felt unconsciously that her mind was kindly disposed toward him, her temperament helpful. She had been the friend and confidante of Gilyan also, and it seemed to him that Betsy better understood his present attitude to Harold's wife than even his mother. His mother, indeed, never spoke of her unless Warner did so, and, as for Lucy, she was openly hostile and never pretended to be otherwise; but Betsy always said the right thing, and appreciated the fact that Warner continued to be interested in the life and desirous for the happiness, of his old sweetheart. He liked to talk of her with Betsy, because he knew that she saw nothing strange in his concern. And this fact insensibly drew him to Betsy herself, though he was as yet far from aware of the consolation he won from her attitude to the great disaster. He it was who spoke of Gilyan now and by so doing, determined the listener to impart her news. He asked directly if she had heard of late from London and hoped, as he often hoped, but only to Betsy, that all was well with the young wife.

"I heard but yesterday. She's very happy and very interested in life for the minute; because—because she's going to have a little one."

He nodded.

"That's good news, I'm sure," he said.

"Yes, indeed it is. But her husband's not very well."

"What's the matter with him?"

"She doesn't say. 'A bit under the weather,' she calls it. He's seen his doctor and expects to be all right come presently."

Warner lighted a pipe and fell silent, while Betsy spoke of other things. For the rest of the evening she did all the talking, and promised to come on the following Sunday to dine at Orchard Lands. His thoughts, though he said little, had passed gradually from her great news to herself. He remembered that she had admired the spaniel puppies and, since there had long been a dim idea in his mind to show Betsy he valued her friendship, he caught at a possibility here. She greatly loved dogs and had not long since lost an old and valued pet.

Inspired with a sudden idea, the man presently took his leave and left 'The Church House' by the side door.

"Just see if Wedlake's in the bar," he said, "and if he is not, I might perhaps look into his house on the way home."

Betsy obeyed, associating James Woodley with Warner's intention. She returned in a moment to say that Melinda's father was not among the nightly guests. Something then touched him to tell her of his obligation.

"You always give to everybody and never get nothing back," he said. "I know that and I feel it. I owe you a lot of kindly patience, Betsy. I can't pay back a penny of it. It belongs to the good things in life we can't pay back—the things best worth having, my mother says. But we can be grateful for 'em. You understand. What don't you understand? I'm grateful anyway."

He left her, knowing that there was no answer; indeed she made no attempt to answer, but looked out into the dark after him with sudden tears in her eyes. Then he descended the long hill to Lower Marldon and presently, turning into a cottage gateway near the Baptist Chapel, passed through a little cabbage garden, over which, in the nightly gloom, fluttered ghostly washing hung on a line between poles, and knocked at the door of a solitary house.

Septimus Wedlake himself, shouted from within.

"Open the door and walk right in," he cried. "I can't come out to 'e, because I've got the rheumatism in my leg."

The visitor entered and found Mr. Wedlake alone beside his kitchen fire, with a pipe in his mouth and a book open under the rays of a paraffin lamp at his elbow. He was a little man, quite bald, with a red neck wrinkled like a turkey's. He wore an out-door cap on his head. His eyes were blue and set in rays of a thousand wrinkles, that extended over his brow and cheek and temple. His mouth was small and humorous; his voice genial. He hawked a good deal in his speech from a chronic catarrh and usually cleared his throat before speaking.

"Sorry you're laid by, Sep," began Warner. "But you will drink beer, and well you know it's poison for a rheumatic blade like you."

"So it is; and you might draw a pint, my dear, for I'm choked wi' thirst and feared I should have to wait for it till my daughter returned. My leg's mending, but the pain comes gnawing of a night, as if a dog had got me by the knee-bone. You'll find the barrel in the shed through the back door. That blue-stained cloam jug's the one."

Warner drew the beer and joined Mr. Wedlake in a glass.

"You'll have to start a wig, Sep," he said. "I didn't guess your wool was gone so clean."

"The hairs on our heads are numbered and known to the Lord, Mr. Lidstone," answered Wedlake, removing his hat and patting his shining skull. "In that respect I shan't put much strain on the Almighty's 'rithmetic. Bald as a coot I've been ever since I was forty-five. They say it comes of too much fondness for the women; but that's a lie in my case. I liked 'em, but well in reason. 'Tis very cool and convenient in summer, though I've thought of a bit of a grey wig for winter-time. But such a thing would be a luxury and I'd rather have the money."

He lowered his hand to a large and ugly dog that lay at his feet, and the creature wagged his tail and returned the caress.

"You've got that marvel of a bitch still, I see?" asked Warner, and the other patted his famous favourite.

"A marvel, as you say."

Warner handed his tobacco pouch and Mr. Wedlake thanked him heartily and took a new clay pipe from a box which held a dozen.

"What is she?" asked the visitor, patting the dog's head. "A pointer?"

Septimus regarded the animal with affection.

"There's pointer in her no doubt; but she's got a houndy look, as you see, and a narrow skull and a cat's feet. Us shall never know what blood be there; but in my opinion if we could learn the truth of that dog, we should discover she's got her bit of breeding from a fine sire and her wonderful intellects from a mongrel dam. That's how I read the dog. Clever as Satan. A brain and a wondrous nose; and I've learned her to understand the movement of my little finger. I never want to open my mouth. Silent and swift as death that dog. A prince of dogs couldn't do the half she does."

"All the same, I hope you don't give her too much to do now-a-days, Sep."

"No, no. Sport be very nearly a thing of the past with me. I haven't got the nature in me I used to have. My sleepless rheumatics have tired my heart a lot. It don't beat like it did. I'm always more or less cold now. The fire be growing low."

"You'll be all right when you've thrown off this attack. But you're an old fool to drink beer."

" 'Tis one of the few pleasures left. My father took to spirits very kindly when the time came to stop malt liquor; but I can't. I hate 'em—not stomachable to me."

"Your father always seemed to me the most wonderful old man," said Warner. "I remember him very well, and his tales."

"There was a feeling against him in the Marldons, and it's come down to me a trifle," answered the elder. "A famous free-trader was father, and still more famous was grandfather. He had tales if you like! I'd be much on his lines if the times allowed it. But what with the law so strong and the liberty of the individual grown so weak, there's little chance to get adventures in this country.

Grandfather was a smuggler, and he smuggled more for sport than gain, just as I have been known to get together a bit of fur and feather claimed by others. Grandfather wasn't fond of money. I wish he had been; but he was cruel fond of sport, and his sport took the fine shape of running contraband cargoes from France to Torbay, and hiding 'em round about here till they could be got safe away. To him the biggest game was man. Not to slay 'em, of course; but to chouse 'em. He properly maddened the preventive officers of his time. Would fox 'em to their faces and laugh at their rage. I could tell you a hundred and one of his tricks. He used the orchards—yours among others—for your grandfather, Humphrey Lidstone, knew my grandfather very well. Between 'em they drove the gaugers frantic, for Lidstone lent his orchard in exchange for many a tidy little runlet of French brandy and roll of tobacco. And a bit of lace sometimes—to stop your old grandmother's mouth and dull her conscience. The game was to build deep and roomy burrows under the grass, and above these hiding-places they'd plant a brave apple tree in half a beer barrel. But the tree was no more than a stopper for the treasure-house underneath. He'd come up and he'd very soon go in again, and when the excisemen came along poking about, Humphrey Lidstone would shake his head and damn the smugglers and tramp over the secret under the grass beside the gaugers!"

Mr. Wedlake gurgled and laughed at these pleasant memories and Warner told him how on an occasion in the past, one of these ancient treasure pits had been discovered at the rooting up of an ancient tree.

"A 'Tom Putt' it was," he said, "undoubtedly planted as a stopper such as you mention. A good hole with rough, stone sides we opened out, and Matt messed down there with a spade for half a day hoping to find a packet of 'baccy, or perhaps a few bottles of Hollands left by the old men; but 'twas empty."

"And now, my dear, what have 'e come about?" asked Septimus presently. "I reckon I know, and I hope nothing have happened to cross you; but let's hear tell."

"I've come about a dog," answered Warner and the old man nodded.

"I was mistook then."

"Miss Wedlake met a friend of mine running your little litter of spaniel dogs," explained the visitor. "I'm no judge of dogs, but I hear they're beauties and I'm wishful to buy one of 'em."

"And so you shall," declared the owner. "There's a sort of feeling in this psalm-smiting village that a dog-fancier be a man who always fancies somebody else's dog. The critical, bad-hearted creatures that abound here think I steal dogs. But no; I've got a lot too much respect for any man who keeps good dogs to try and take 'em from him. A cat now and then may have met with a fatal accident and gone in under my raspberry canes. I won't say nothing about that; because all cats be better underground than above it in my opinion. But a dog—never. The mother of they puppies be my own boughten bitch known to the Marldons as 'Silky'; and the sire is George Shirley's prize dog to Newton Abbot. And what might you offer for one of 'em?"

"Name your price," said Warner.

"You shall have the top flower of the bunch," promised Mr. Wedlake. "He's the spit of his father and making up into a very fine and finished spaniel. How would three quid suit you?"

"Well, it's enough, Sep."

"After distemper he'll be worth five, God's my judge."

"All right. I'll come along for him in a week or ten days, I shouldn't wonder."

"Good," answered the other. "You don't keep enough dogs at Orchard Lands. He shall be ready."

" 'Tis for a friend."

"A female, I hope?" ventured Mr. Wedlake.

"Miss Neck, Paul's daughter."

"A very nice young woman, indeed, and large-minded, like the parent bird. Nobody knows Paul's greatness so well as me, because he can open out to me—a thing he don't dare afore most of his customers."

"They say you should do as Paul Neck does, and not as he says," answered Warner.

At this moment Melinda Wedlake came home and showed a little anxiety at the unexpected visitor.

"It's all right," whispered her father under his breath. "He've come for a dog."

She brightened then and begged Warner not to go, as he rose to do so. But he guessed what was in her mind and showed unusual perception. He shook hands with Septimus and, as Melinda showed him out, he spoke to her.

"I've heard a word about you and my good friend, James Woodley, Miss Wedlake. That's your business and his and nobody else's; but if you and your father would like to know it, I may tell you that I, for one, should be very pleased, indeed, if he was lucky enough to win you. He's a God-fearing, honest chap—one of the best and as straight as a line. He can't sing his own praises—he's not that sort; but he's all right. Good-night."

CHAPTER XVI

APPEALS

MATTHEW FAWDEN, with an assistant, was overhauling the cider barrels in a great semi-subterranean cellar which opened out of the press. From here the hollow echo of mallets throbbed through the orchard, where Mrs. Lidstone and Lucy walked together. July sunshine beat down through the trees and fruit was ripening. Already "Devonshire Quarrenden" and "Irish Peach" might be eaten, while an apple new to Orchard Lands, received from a Jersey grower and now fast winning a scarlet coat upon the bough, challenged Mary's attention.

" 'Tis called 'Saint Everard,' " she said, "and there'll be 'Cox's Orange Pippin' in it for flavour; but it's like all earlies, no keeper. They do their work and carry us on to the finer things that follow after."

Lucy was not interested in the apples. There had come a letter from Harold Lidstone to her mother that morning and the incident led her to discuss the past, though, as her mother told her, the operation was futile enough.

"The more you turn it over, the clearer you see it was a plot," said Lucy, "and that's to make them out such a wicked pair that I don't see why we should have any more truck with them."

"So you've said before; and even if it was true it don't make them out so bad as you think. There was cleverness in it—even a sort of charity to Warner."

"I don't see that at all, mother. She never meant to be drowned; and if you grant that, then they are a pair of traitors to all of us. And no doubt Harold laughs to see us so meek and mild and friendly still."

"He's not laughing much for the minute."

"What Warner did and suffered was far worse for him than if she'd chucked him once for all and ran away with Harold. Gilyan was thinking of herself—not Warner. She was out to run with the hares and hunt with the hounds. And, because we're all so soft, she brought it off. I hate her, and I hope she'll live to look back and smart to her dying day for what she did."

"Never hope ill for anybody, Lucy. You might remember it, when the ill comes along, and be sorry."

"Oh, she's the sort all goes well with. Her heart's too hard to hurt—just the kind of woman that gets everything her own way and makes people see there's no justice anywhere."

"In a year, or less, I dare say you'll be sorry you spoke that. What does her husband's letter say? That he's queer and coughing again. He writes with a cheerful heart, but people with weak breathing power always are cheerful-minded. That's their compensation. He wants Devonshire cream—a pound a week regular—and sends money for the first six weeks. Must have that, or cod liver oil, and he won't drink oil for anybody."

"What does he say about Gilyan?" asked Lucy.

"He mentions her."

Mrs. Lidstone brought the letter out of her pocket.

"I wasn't going to show you the letter; but I don't know there's any reason why for I should not."

"I don't want to see it, mother."

"Yes; but you'd best to, so as you and me can understand how things go on. You never know what's hid in the future; but things will happen. Harold writes in a painful sort of way to my ear. It's the queer, unreal spirit that used to break out of him sometimes—not happy nor yet miserable. Would-be laughter; yet us older ones know from experience he's laughing the wrong side of his mouth. Just Harold—the result of superior education no doubt.

Us everyday folk can't do it, because we never feel it. To joke at life in other people be in our power; but to joke at life as it touches us—that ain't so easy; and when people laugh at something that's hurting 'em, I don't like to listen. However, he may not mean much, I dare say. Only his town-bred way. Things that seem startling to us, are just common-places in the mouth of townsfolk. Their minds move so much quicker.''

She handed Harold's communication to Lucy and left her sitting on a bough to read it. Mary passed through the light and shadow of her orchard aisles in the direction whence the cooper's mallet beat; while her daughter perused Harold's letter. She skipped the petition for cream and allusions to health. It was only the ironical mention of Harold's wife that interested her.

''Gilyan's fine,'' he wrote. ''She's been a god-send to the business and her large heart and natural regard for anything in a pair of trousers brings the boys—specially the middle-aged ones—in a stream. Unfortunately the ones that please her are her own generation; and they are young and poor. The older birds, who are game for my expensive cigars, don't win so many smiles. 'Cheat-the-Boys' she is, and 'Cheat-the-Boys' she will remain—old boys, or young. If a jealous chap had married Gilyan, his days would have been poison and his nights sleepless. It's the sort who don't know the meaning of jealousy themselves that often wake most jealousy in their partners; and jealousy is a compliment come to think of it. But she's not jealous of me and I'm not jealous of her—for the good reason that so to be would only waste energy and make no shadow of difference to the situation. She's as good as gold, only she must be playing, and married life haven't struck her yet as a serious ordeal and obligation. We love each other like the devil. I'm planning a bit of fun for Bank Holiday; but how long my idea of fun and her idea of fun will look alike, who can say? She was wondering a few months ago whether I'd like her to join the chorus of the 'Momus Theatre.' She said it would mean a little money and only take an hour or two of an evening! I just mention this to show she's got no earthly idea of reality yet. However, she'll have something else to wonder at now if what she tells me is true. I mean a child. That'll be a boy she won't cheat I expect. In fact, I may say I shall take damned good care she doesn't. Yet what's the use of talking? We blow and we bluster; but with a girl like my precious treasure you might as well try to bully a sunbeam, or speak harshly to a daffodil. You can't lecture her; and I don't want to for that matter. She's terribly fond of me and a good bit fretted just now because I'm coughing. In fact, we're the most united and happiest couple on God's earth; though whether that's as much as it sounds, who can tell? I must keep fit and hearty, anyway, as becomes the husband of such a wonder, so fire on the Devonshire cream, like an old dear."

He proceeded to ask after Warner and Lucy; but the remainder of the letter did not arride the present reader. She sat staring through the trees, and already a shadow of regret for her recent speeches tinctured her mind.

"There weren't much need for me to wish them ill," thought Lucy. Then she reflected on her brother. "It would never do for him to read that," she felt.

"'Tis a horrid beast of a letter," the girl presently declared, when she joined Mrs. Lidstone. "There's a hateful something in it I can't put a name to, and I wouldn't show it to Warner if I was you, mother."

"I don't intend to, my dear. Betsy Neck can look after the cream for him. But no need for you to pull such a long face. You must allow for Harold, as I do. These sour things slip from his pen. A man will often calm his ruffled feelings by writing down a lot of nonsense that he wouldn't hold to an hour afterwards. If this was shown to him next week, I dare say he'd swear he didn't remember writing it. We'll work off poison like that, and then be properly outraged if it comes back to us. That's often the best use of friends—to be a sort of patient heap where you can shoot your rubbish and then forget all about it.''

But Lucy took the matter seriously. She argued that Harold's banter hid more bitterness than he allowed to appear.

''How shall you answer it?'' she asked.

''I don't know yet if I shall answer it. We'll see as to that.''

''Not a word about his wife's grandmother and her bad season.''

''You wouldn't expect Withy Lease to interest him. He may not know they're hard up. Who would if it wasn't for Mark Fawden? No pride in him; but Jennifer's made of it.''

''He's coming up tonight—Mark, I mean,'' answered Lucy. ''He can come to supper, can't he? I told Matthew to fetch in a good lot of early apples for him.''

''I've done it,'' replied her mother. ''He's had a dose of his marsh fever, poor old boy; not that anything keeps him down-daunted for long.''

But for once 'Frog' Fawden did display an unusual shadow of depression. Not his own ailment troubled him, for he was already in good health again; but the circumstances at the osier farm were exasperating. Despite excellent harvests, no market presented itself, and as yet Mrs. Purchase had hardly recorded a prospective sale of willow or reed.

''And as for our cresses,'' sighed Mark, ''I'm sick to death of telling all the tramps and wasters they be private property. The rascals can't or won't understand we grow 'em for a living. Pounds and pounds value they filch, and what can you do about it? Missis won't make an example of man or woman, and they know there's nought worse to fear than the edge of my tongue.''

''That's not going to fright anybody,'' laughed Lucy, and Matthew asked his brother a question.

''Can't Harold Lidstone do nothing, Mark? He might keep you in mind and get you some orders up London way. There's a great demand if you could only reach to it. And his wife might stir herself, I should think. What's the good of her being in London at the centre of trade if she can't lend the old woman a hand?''

''Between ourselves in private,'' confessed Mark, ''I've been at Gilyan. Of course, Jennifer would rather jump over the moon than let on we weren't up to our necks in orders; but, unbeknownst to her, I wrote a long letter and said that Mrs. Purchase was very hard up. Gilyan answered the letter—I grant her that; but there was nothing to it. She said her husband found himself over-crowded with expenses now-a-days, and more coming. She's going to bear it in mind and fully means to send a few pounds later; and she'll see if, among their regular customers, there's anybody knows anybody who wants withy for basket-making and such like. And she'd be glad of some water-cresses herself—to help Harold let down his breakfast. He's a poor hand at breakfast, seemingly, as Londoners often are. They don't hunger till after noon by all accounts, which is very unnatural in 'em, because morning be the proper time to eat for beast and man. But as for money, she says I should be properly mazed to find how town life eats it up. And though, of course, she can't deny they make much bigger money than us country people, they also have to spend a lot more than us and pay hugeous rents and taxes and so on.''

''All that's true enough,'' said Mrs. Lidstone, ''and no doubt it's an eye-opener for Gilyan.''

''How much goes on her back?'' growled Matthew.

''Be quiet, Matt! Now 'tis for those nearest Jennifer, like us, to be useful,'' continued Mary, ''and we've got to think of two points. We've got to think of something we want that we can get from her; and we've got to make it clear to Jennifer that we do want it. Because, if she thought it was charity, she'd fly out.''

''Like your cleverness, ma'am,'' said Mark. ''But I'm fearful that there's nothing in the withy line be any use here. If you was to make your own baskets now; but, of course, basket-making is a high craft in itself.''

'' 'Tisn't withies, but reed,'' answered Mrs. Lidstone.

''Reed's a dead thing and Mrs. Purchase knows it,'' declared Matthew. ''What could you do with reed, ma'am? There's no thatch in the Orchard Lands, save the big byre, and that's rotten, and it was pretty well settled we had a correlgated iron roof next spring.''

''Damn all correlgated iron,'' swore 'Frog.' ''It have been the ruin of our reed-rond!''

''I don't like it, either,'' answered Mary. ''I'm inclined to have new thatch, and your reed, if 'twas properly laid, would last my time. Then Warner can do what he likes. You come up when you can, Mark, and look over it. A big byre, as you know, and then I'd see Jennifer and mention it casual, as if it was a thing of little account.''

Mr. Fawden was greatly heartened.

''That's a proper stroke,'' he said, ''and you won't repent it. The grass be rising strong as need be and you can count upon a cut very much above the common, I believe. 'Tis all this here thatching with wheat straw that have given the thing a bad name; but no wheat straw ever grown be up to such reed as ours. And you talk of it not lasting above your life-time. Why, if 'tis laid on by a master-datcher,* 'twill be good for a hundred years, I believe.''

''Datchers are rare now,'' replied Mary. ''I only know a few old men you can trust. The craft be dying for

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**Datcher*. Thatcher.

lack of use. Yet what's sweeter than nice, well-finished thatch?"

Warner came in at this moment and listened with respect to his mother's intention.

"Not iron, then, for the byre?" he asked.

"If 'tis reed, 'tis charity, however you look at it," snapped Matthew. "I say nought; but this be an age for iron for roofs and steel for tools."

Mark regarded his twin brother reproachfully.

"The iron have entered into your soul," continued Matthew, "and from your point of view iron roofs be the devil's work, no doubt; but I never was one for charity—no more than Mrs. Purchase herself; and she'll see through this, because she well knows that reed's forgot by this generation. Our fathers done with a lot of simple, earth-born contrivances, like reed; but we, as be higher in wisdom and understanding, didn't ought to hamper the wheels of progress. Paul Neck says we've become men now-a-days and did ought to put by childish things."

Warner laughed.

"What about cider?" he asked. "You know very well cider's on the down grade."

This was always a challenge that roused Matthew to fury, and Mark, who felt unbrotherly for the moment, grinned behind his hand at Lucy.

But for once Matthew surprised them, for he saw through his master and refused to be drawn. Indeed, he won the laugh.

"So long as you make so good cider as your mother does, and your father did, and his father afore him, Warner Lidstone, cider won't perish, nor the need for it," he answered. "Cider's so great and grand a natural drink as the juice of grapes, and a damned sight wholesomer, because them that make it be a damned sight wholesomer than wine-makers. And when you hear tell of cider going out of fashion, it means that cider ban't made right, and apples mixed anyhow, and filthy chemicals stuck in for it to fizz and sparkle that breed a hurricane in the bowels after drinking.''

Mary applauded.

''Well done you, Matt!'' she cried. ''Never a truer word, my dear.''

''Let them as like to drink wine, drink it,'' concluded Matthew, conscious of his triumph. ''If you want to blow your roof off with champagne, do so; or if you like pouring burn-gout and rheumatics into your joints with red wine, that's your own affair; but cider be a pure, innocent drink —life instead of death.''

He turned to his brother.

''And you needen goggle your eyes against me neither, Mark, for I'd much like to know where you'd have been without it?''

''I grant that, I grant that, Matt. The apple have put years on my life both as meat and drink; but we was talking about iron, not apples; and you can't fairly ax a reed man to like a thing that takes the bread out of his mouth.''

''You must cut a loss, Frog,'' argued Warner. ''You must drain that mud-hole called Withy Lease and get the water out of it; and then you'd have the best bit of meadow land in the parish.''

''It will happen,'' admitted Mark. ''I understand so well as the wisest that the world can't stand still. When we go, the place will be sold to moneyed men and go on its way rejoicing, no doubt; but Jennifer Purchase knows no changing and more don't I. She's too old to leave it, and I'm too old to l'arn a new trade. Outside willows I'm a know-nought, so I've got to stick to 'em for my self-respect, so long as they will stick to me.''

He departed presently, well pleased with a basket of apples, having promised to come and look at the byre in a day or two.

They praised him when he had gone and Matthew contributed to the applause.

"A very nice man is my twin brother—like all Fawdens," declared Matthew; "and if hopefulness was marketable, he'd have made a fortune thirty years ago; but 'twas ever a family failing and I'm the only one as saw from my youth up that hope didn't ought to outrun experience. Who get all the hardest knocks? The hopeful ones."

"And how long would the world go round without 'em?" asked Mrs. Lidstone.

CHAPTER XVII

COUNCIL

MELINDA WEDLAKE's body was square and massive; her mind had been battered into patience by many difficult years. She was now twenty-eight and since her mother's death, it had been her lot to look after the house of her father. She had been called to serve him with loyalty under circumstances that often left her feeling a very wicked woman. But her conscience was not dead or even numbed. She suffered much, and only her extensive knowledge of what a man may be had prevented her from marrying long ago and escaping into a home of her own. As Melinda truly said, when discussing her opinions and experiences with James Woodley, "You can't choose your father; but you can choose your husband; and a parent like mine l'arns you a great many sad things and throws an ugly light on men in general."

This, however, James refused to admit.

"You must remember," he answered, "that up till now you haven't seen how good a man can be. In my case, for example, goodness ain't virtue—it's nature, or, anyway, second nature."

He had found Mr. Wedlake's daughter too much discouraged by life and too suspicious of his sex to be at first a cheerful companion; but the horseman considered that Melinda's disposition was not naturally of a gloomy cast. She could laugh and she could hope; and after a period of caution, during which she said little, but weighed Jimmy's sentiments, she surprised him by a substantial increase of friendship.

In fear and trembling Melinda permitted herself to become attached to Mr. Woodley. He approached with the charm of novelty, and after the revolutionary opinions and frank scorn that her father and his companions were accustomed to pour on the social state, the steadfast and satisfied view of James proved rich in promise of security and peace. Ideas that to the ears of other maidens were mean and even cowardly, appeared admirable in Melinda's opinion; while the fact that Septimus, who might have been expected to flout James as a suitor for her, did no such thing, was an additional source of comfort. She hoped that the rebellious old man respected Woodley and she did not guess that the opinions of Mr. Wedlake were in reality influenced by quite other considerations. Yet the fact remained: her father approved the match and regarded James with favour. He had, indeed, long desired to be free of Melinda for private reasons.

She had told him plainly that he must not expect any sort of assistance from her future husband, and he had declared that no such unworthy hope inspired him.

"Fear nothing," he said. "I can take care of myself very clever, and I shan't want to see the colour of Jimmy's money so long as he don't want to see the colour of mine."

So the maiden accepted James, to his very great pride and satisfaction; and then came an evening when he brought Melinda to see his mother at the cottage behind the contorted cupressus. Mrs. Woodley prepared a little meal for the occasion, to show Melinda that nothing but friendship awaited her.

But each woman desired to say some definite things to the other, and to receive certain assurances. Their conversation was conducted before James himself up to a point; then Sarah, desiring to discuss Jimmy under certain aspects with the help-mate he had won, bade him take his pipe and go out of doors for a while.

Before his departure, however, general subjects were considered. Sarah kissed Melinda and bade her seat herself. She then addressed the man.

"Cut that seedy cake and pour three glasses of sherry wine, James," she said. "This is a minute to which I have looked forward, well knowing it was sure to come."

"And I'll say this, Mrs. Woodley," began Melinda. "I've seen a lot of marrying against the wish of relations, and when Jimmy offered for me and I took him, I told him that there was a condition, and that was you found yourself satisfied. I won't marry no man with a mother unless that mother's going to be pleased about it, because well I know if she ain't pleased, there'll be a lot of ill-convenience after. I'm marrying for peace and quietness before all things, and until James swore you weren't against me because of my family, I left it open. But he says you feel very well content and I hope and pray that's true."

"Nothing like having an understanding," answered the elder, "and I may tell you that I'm one that never do judge of a person by their relations, because, as often as not, that's a very unfair thing to do. There's black sheep come out of white flocks, as we all know; and there's white sheep come out of black flocks, though that's rarer. But I'm not saying your father's black all through. I don't hold with a lot he's done and a lot he trumpets about, but no honest man or woman ever sees eye to eye with one of their fellow creatures. Why, take my dear, future husband, Mr. Neck. Even he, love him though I do—so much as a woman of my age can love—yet he'll say things I don't hold with out of his manly intellect. And if he done some of the things he says, I shouldn't be marrying him next Michaelmas. But there it is; though I hope for your own sake you don't agree with your father, because Septimus Wedlake is a red radical and would confound the nation and bring all down if he had the power to do so."

"I don't agree with him at all," replied Melinda. "I know he's a wrong 'un and talks a parlous deal of wicked nonsense. I agree with James, who be wiser than father. James, in his quiet way, have often showed me that my father don't live up to his own dangerous opinions; and if a man don't do that, there's no call to take him serious. You'll never catch father belling no cat, for all he shouts out it did ought to be done."

"For instance," put in Mr. Woodley, who enjoyed this conversation. "What did Mr. Wedlake say yesterday? He said, 'If a man don't work, he didn't ought to be allowed to eat.' I answered him: 'But in that case, where are you? You don't work and well you know it, because you say you never was anybody's servant and never will be. And yet you eat and have ate for sixty-five years.' Had him there!"

"And you might have also said that he eats a lot he haven't paid for," added Sarah.

Melinda returned to the subject.

"Your opinion of James marrying me be favorable then, Mrs. Woodley?" she asked.

"It is. I'm very pleased about it, and so is Mr. Neck."

"And so are my mistress and Mr. Lidstone," added James. "Mr. Lidstone told Melinda I was all right."

"I'm very wishful to have him," continued Miss Wedlake. "We see much alike and be rare peace-lovers; and though Jimmy has always known the blessing of peace and no fear of the future has ever darkened his days, it ain't the same with me."

"You must have lacked peace to know the worth of it," answered Sarah. "You'll have that with my son, Melinda. He's sought peace and ensued it all his life. If he's got a fault, and I'm not saying he has, it's an inclination sometimes to put peace before anything else on earth. But you know well enough that peace have got to be fought for now and again."

"Nobody knows that better than me," declared Melinda.

"My father's different. He mopes under peace if it goes on too long. For a man of his age to want adventures at all is shameful in my opinion; but he'll seek 'em so long as he can walk, or let off a gun. I want to get away from him, because he's a very unrestful old man and won't yield himself up to me except when he's ill. But so soon as he can hop about again, he's off after something doubtful, and God He knows, when I've cooked a bird, or beast, as didn't honestly belong to us, my tears have falled in the pot, A policeman always gives me the shivers even out in the open road, let alone when I see 'em creep up our garden path; but father—a policeman coming in properly braces him. It be like a drink to him. He loves danger."

"Well, I hate it," declared James. "There's nothing in this world I be less drawn to than danger. I'll go half a day's journey any time to escape from it; and when you've married me, you'll forget the meaning of the word, I shouldn't wonder."

"I hope so; but I'll never forget the past: it was too sharp ever to forget it," replied Melinda. "And I've told my father that, once away, I'm away for good and all. He quite understands. In fact, he backed me up in it, rather to my surprise. He's got ideas for the future and I dare say if we was to know them, we should be very cast down. But there it is. My duty will be to James and nobody else for ever more."

"And I don't have no truck with him either," promised Jimmy. "I've told him he mustn't come to me for any help, if he does dark things and wants honest men to get him out of 'em. And he said I needn't fear, because I wasn't at all the sort of man to be much use to him at a pinch. He said, 'Afore I come to you, my right hand will have forgot its cunning, James,' and I was proud to know it."

"Now you can go and leave me a bit with Melinda, Jimmy," said Sarah, when the cake was eaten and the wine drunk. "You'd best to set the rat-trap outside the kitchen sink, for I saw a rat so big as a rabbit this morning and it's the fault of the people next door—as rats always are in my experience.''

When her son was gone, Mrs. Woodley entered into various domestic details and the future wife listened with deep attention.

''If you've got a good memory, no doubt you'll not forget,'' said Sarah, ''if you haven't, best write down what I'm going to tell you in one of them little penny books when you go home, and keep it by you after marriage. I've lost touch with James the last year or two, since he took to living in at Orchard Lands, to be on the spot for early work; but I know all that matters about him and there's a few items that will be very useful for you to mind, because they make for the peace you're so much set on. A man is a man, Melinda—always remember that—and the peaceful among 'em have got their dispositions and their weak spots same as the notorious ones. The worm will turn, and there's an unexpected corner in every man's character that a wife have got to put her nose into soon or late. They're greedier than us, which is natural, because they work harder with their bodies, if not their brains, and Jimmy likes tasty things with the best. His stomach lets him down sometimes, however, and except of a Sunday you'll do well not to blossom out much. He loves figgy pudding at all times and seasons, and I've never heard him say that got back on him unfriendly. He drinks but little, but he must have his beer of a night; and when you want to please him, now and again, just you fetch out the whiskey bottle and tell him to take a nightcap. He'll never help himself to one, but it will pay you very well sometimes to make him take a spot of good spirits. And flannel next to his skin always, winter and summer. Thin for summer, thick for winter. Drive him into the thick ones on the first of November and don't let him take 'em off before mid-April, or May. He's wanting for winter shirts now, and my wedding gift to him will be the stuff, and you can set about making 'em so soon as you've done you own marriage sewing."

"So I will then."

"And mind you dress nice week-days as well as Sundays, because you're the sort it pays to be clothed clever. I've used him to that and he'd feel something was missing if you didn't look smart after the day's work. He's a very clean man and he won't like it if you're not the same. Don't listen about the bath-room, however; they've got a bath-room at Orchard Lands, and Jimmy often says we might have one put up here, and wonders what it would be like. Let him go on wondering. Fansical things like that are an excuse for laziness, not cleanliness. The clean will be clean so long as there's soap and water for 'em. Bath-rooms are only a habit, like cucumber frames and other luxuries."

Sarah discoursed for half an hour, and Melinda, whose memory was of the best, absorbed all that she heard. Then James returned to see his sweetheart home, and at parting Mrs. Woodley kissed Melinda and told her that she liked her.

"I be pleased with your appearance, as I always have been, and I can see you're a thoughtful and sensible woman for your age," she said; "and no doubt living along with a widowed father, and such an active old man as he is, have given you plenty to think about and learned you a lot. You deserve to have a good husband and I'm glad you've got one. Me and Mr. Neck are going to be married at the beginning of October, and if I may advise, I should say that you and James could wed when we come back from our bit of a holiday. Then you can have your send-off from the 'Church House,' which will suit your father very well no doubt."

Melinda rejoiced at the prospect.

"I've been in a twitter about that for a good bit," she confessed. "'Twould be a much braver affair and a lot worthier of James if we married from Mr. Neck's hotel."

"It shall happen," promised Sarah, and the lovers left her.

As they proceeded homeward, James caught sight of another man and woman ahead of them in the moonlight. They were not entwined, as Melinda and the horseman, yet he spoke hopefully of their united future.

"'Tis master!" he whispered, slowing down. "And that's Betsy Neck along with him. She's been down to take supper with the family. He's had a cruel crossing in love and he's only recovering by inches you may say; but I shouldn't wonder if he was to look to her for salvation—next year perhaps."

"To think!" murmured Melinda. "Then you would be related, in a sort of way by marriage, to your own master, Jimmy!"

The idea had not struck James in this light.

"My! You're a clever one for seeing things," he said. "But thank God I know my place, Melinda."

"Us ain't the sort to take liberties be it as it will," she told him.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT 'CHURCH HOUSE'

"The air's properly reeking with marriage," said Matthew Fawden.

He stood at the bar of 'The Church House' and drank a glass of stout.

"I never remember such a hateful rush, and all in sight to once," he continued, while Paul Neck nodded and listened.

"Fust, of course, there's you and Mrs. Woodley, and your affair appears to have started the parish. Then there's Arthur Partridge going into it and your son-in-law to be, James Woodley; and, if I ain't a fool, a greater than these. You take my meaning, no doubt."

Paul nodded again.

"It's going to happen presently if every man minds his own business and leaves 'em alone. I hope Mrs. Lidstone ain't putting no questions nor touching on the matter. Silence is golden in a business of this kind."

"Like your wisdom to say so," declared Matthew. "No, be sure Mary Lidstone is so clever as yourself. For my part I hope they'll all leave it alone into late autumn. Us don't want no Lammas weddings for young people. They mean that the woman be laid by next year just at hay harvest, when there's far more important matters to attend to."

"You hard-hearted old devil!" said Mr. Neck.

"It's no good for us all to lose our heads. The world did ought thank God for its bachelors, instead of poking silly fun at 'em."

"I wonder now. We hear the spinsters praised a good bit for their good will and patient work; but I can't say as I ever have heard a bachelor patted on the back.''

Then came Septimus Wedlake into the bar; but he was no friend of Matthew. Indeed, the apple man much disliked him.

''We was just saying that along of one thing and another, and so much marrying and giving in marriage, we shall soon be able to signal 'all's clear' all round, Septimus,'' said Paul, fetching from behind him the bottle of unsweetened Plymouth gin he knew his guest would need. But Wedlake was unprepared to grant any purview so cheerful.

''You never can signal, 'all's clear' and never will,'' he said. ''For why? Because no man ever gets the chance.''

''If not, then 'tis his own fault,'' declared Matthew sharply. ''Us, who take thought of our duty, and do our duty to our neighbours as well as ourselves, find the way clear enough.''

''You unfinished men may do so,'' returned Septimus; ''though I don't much believe it. The truth is that we ain't treated fair.''

''We don't treat ourselves fair,'' said Paul. ''Us—the only creatures who have got reason—be the most unreasonable of the lot. And that's one of the wonders of the world in my opinion.''

''A pity we have then,'' answered Wedlake. ''A pity we have got reason, for if we had no more than a rookery of crows, or a nest of emmets, we should be as busy and friendly and contented as them. But if reason have sunk us below the beasts, then 'tis a curse in disguise and I'm sure I don't want it.''

''You're drunk,'' snapped Matthew.

''Not me. I'm never drunk now-a-days. Only reasonable people get drunk. I fight reason and never let my conscience fret me. For all my sins put together be light in the balance against all my troubles. My sins wouldn't sink a nutshell, Matthew Fawden, though no doubt you think they would. I don't even call 'em 'sins.' Because that's only a matter of opinion. They be deeds rather than sins, and more than three parts we do is neither good nor evil, but just machine work that haven't nothing to do with right or wrong."

Mr. Fawden regarded him sourly.

"Pleased with yourself, but out of heart with everybody else," he said. "Tinkling brass, I call you. Though I'd sooner have you noisy than quiet. Your noise don't hurt anybody; your silence generally means that, like any other bad child, you're up to mischief."

And then Mrs. Woodley appeared and Matthew withdrew.

"Talk some sense to that there poaching man between you," he said, frowned on Septimus and went his way.

Conversation, however, had to do with affairs, not morals. Sarah was invited to give her opinion of Mr. Wedlake's daughter.

"I've felt a good bit depended on that, and I've told Paul so," explained Septimus. "As for your son, I need only say I'm mighty well pleased that he should take Melinda; and I'd like to hear you say you thought so well of my girl as I do of your boy."

"I think better of her," answered Sarah. "Pretence and civility apart a man like you couldn't think much of James, because he's so different from yourself. If you think well of yourself, as we all know you do, then you couldn't think particular well of Jimmy. But you've got the sense to know that he'll be a tower of strength as a married man. And if you haven't, Melinda has. I do think a great deal of her already. One advantage of living with you has been that she's under no errors about reality. She don't want better bread than is made of wheat, nor nothing like that. She'll be a very fine wife, and she's got the wit and experience to know that a man like James, though not a great adornment to a home in his looks and person, is yet a safe resting-place for a woman—what you might call the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land. She wants peace, your Melinda. Why for, at her young age, she should hunger for peace above all earthly joys, you know better than us. But with James she'll get peace; and I hope you won't be the one to try and break it."

"Not me," promised Mr. Wedlake. "A thimbleful more, Paul, and then I must hop. No, Mrs. Woodley, you needn't fear anything of that sort. Both James and Melinda seem to go in dread of their lives that I shan't give 'em any peace after the wedding—that I shall sponge on the man and come begging to my daughter. But they're quite mistook. I don't sponge, nor yet beg, nor yet push my nose where it ain't wanted. I've got plenty of friends who understand and value me far more than my daughter or son-in-law ever could. I can look ahead also. Perhaps I have. Anyway I've got to think for Number One sometimes, because there's none else to do so in my case. And I'm not past all hope of happiness even at my age."

"Blessed if I don't think you've got your eye on a woman too!" said Paul and Septimus smiled.

"Upon that subject deeds speak louder than words," he replied. "But always remember not to judge, Mrs. Woodley. If you don't judge, then you won't be judged. I may take a step presently that a few of the good ones will regret and I may make a few enemies here and there by so doing; but one true friend is worth risking fifty enemies for, in my opinion. And a few enemies, more or less, don't matter to a misunderstood man like me."

"'Tis your own fault you're misunderstood, Mr. Wedlake," said Sarah.

"Far from it. You don't understand, nor yet even Paul. I'm not much afraid of what you and him will think, because you belong to the big-minded sort, and though you don't go all the way with Paul, yet you wouldn't marry him if you thought his opinions dangerous. Him and me look at life very much alike on all large questions, and understand a lot more touching religion than those that make such a noise about practising it. We can look our God in the eye-ball, me and Mr. Neck, without shame and without false modesty, or anything like that. We've got our own opinions, and also got the right to 'em.''

''We're all His children, and it ain't decent that children should take that line with their parent; and I've told Mr. Neck himself so, for that matter,'' declared Sarah.

But Septimus was prepared for this argument: he had heard it often before.

''We have a Society for prevention of cruelty to children anyway,'' he said, ''and what be half our contrivances and charities and hospitals and workhouses but societies for the prevention of God's cruelties to His children? Because you've got the power to make a world, that don't give you the right to play football with it after it is made. If you fashion a world of respectable creatures, you ought to respect 'em and give 'em a chance to respect you and themselves.''

''That's enough, Sep,'' said the publican. ''You can cut out your views on that subject, my dear, because so long as your practice be so doubtful, nobody will care a damn for your preaching. Nobody did ought to be more careful of their behaviour than them that set up for greater wisdom than their neighbours, Sep. I think a lot of you, as you well know, but while you break the laws, you mustn't hope your opinions will win you new friends.''

''The Book says 'God is Love,' '' declared Mrs. Woodley, ''and you did ought to believe it, whatever else you don't believe, Mr. Wedlake.''

''Not against my senses, ma'am. Handsome is as handsome does. That's naked truth, and if you can't square your opinions with truth, then 'tis silly to hold 'em. And the bitter truth is that us daren't trust the Lord a yard—nor yet His promises."

"That cuts both ways," began Paul; but the entrance of Betsy in trouble, silenced him.

She carried a letter and since it contained no secrets, she spoke.

"Just heard from Gilyan," she said, "and she's a lot put about."

"I knew everything was going too suent,"* explained Sarah. "When you find you're in luck turn where you will, then 'tis time to brace yourself for a change of wind. But I hope there's no very bad thing happened to her."

"It's Harold Lidstone. She's been at him for a long time to see a first-rate doctor and get advice about himself, because he's seen blood when he's coughed and she feared. And now he's gone to a famous specialist and paid three pounds. And the man has told him he's in a declinement."

There was silence for a moment and Sarah looked at Paul Neck.

"We must be hopeful," he said. "I've know cases where the patient was far gone and yet they saved him. And we don't know yet if the tobacconist be very bad. He may be able to take it in time. It don't follow it'll shorten life, because you've got a touch."

"Gilyan's awful fretted, father."

"So she should be," answered Paul. "It's a very serious affair; but she must be brave and make him the same. She's got lots of intellects when she likes to use 'em; and now it's up to her to rise to the occasion and be a good, useful wife."

"She will—you can trust her to hearten him up—so cheerful as she always is," declared Betsy. "She wants for me to go up to her. She feels a bit helpless for the minute, because Harold hasn't got any relations to name, and none that's any use."

"We'll see as to that. We shall hear a bit more presently. Maybe her next letter will take a brighter line,'' answered Paul. ''How should you say they was off for money, my dear?''

''None too well, I'm afraid.''

''It might be better if Mrs. Purchase went up,'' suggested Sarah, and Betsy agreed that Jennifer would be more useful in some ways, though not in others.

''She's more experienced, but she never takes the bright side. 'Tis a time for hopeful people, I expect,'' replied she. Then she left them and Septimus spoke.

''Another apple-cart upset by the watching Lord!'' he said. ''You mark me. The tobacco man's going to drop out, and then what? His wife a pauper, I shouldn't wonder, and back on her grandmother's hands with another mouth to feed when her child's born. And God is love—eh, Mrs. Woodley?''

''No doubt God will mind His business, as He always does,'' answered Sarah.

''The man ain't dead yet, and you oughtn't to look so far forward, Sep,'' reproved Mr. Neck.

''Look a little further still,'' answered the poacher grimly, ''and ask yourself this. What'll the chap you want to marry your daughter do about it, if his old flame comes in the market again?''

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE ORCHARDS

THE best intelligence that Warner Lidstone possessed was now bent upon his own affairs, and from the tempest of grief, into which he had been plunged by disappointed love, he began to emerge. He was not sure of himself, yet could now measure the height and depth of the new situation created almost unconsciously by his own distraction. He had found of late, in the companionship of Betsy Neck, a peace that neither his own thoughts nor the opinions of other people created for him. She could speak of Gilyan naturally and accept the situation from her own point of view rather than from his. Other people either blamed her, or avoided the subject of her; but Betsy did neither. She cared for Gilyan; she was concerned for the life of Gilyan and always discussed her without emotion, but with unconcealed interest. It seemed to Warner that Betsy more or less took his own standpoint; and the fact that she did served, in a larger manner than he realised, to comfort him and dull his pain.

For this reason he often sought her anodyne at home, and was also quick to offer her the hospitality of Orchard Lands when opportunities occurred. She seldom refused, for she knew that the man's mother and sister were always very glad to see her. But she loved Warner and her love began to take alarm. The friendship meant much to her; yet suspecting that it meant something very different to him, she began to consider with herself. It had been a pleasant and welcome task to lift up his bruised heart a little, win him back to life's interests, hear him laugh again sometimes;

and she knew that Mary Lidstone had blessed her for the good faith and simple art with which she accomplished this task. But she also knew that Lucy and her mother were familiar with the fact that she cared greatly for the stricken lover; and now had come a time when Betsy felt that such a close and intimate friendship put too heavy a strain upon herself, although she was not emotional or sensitive. But love is love, and she could feel. There had been gleams of tenderness from Warner and he was far from indifferent to all he owed her. He had, indeed, declared his obligation and shown his gratitude in many ways since the gift of the spaniel puppy. Once or twice he had hesitated when with her, as though about to say something very vital, and she had seen in his truthful eyes more than acknowledgement of her ever ready sympathy. But she could not look into his heart, or unravel the confusion that still ruled there; she could hardly yet appreciate the fact that, while she was now growing dear to him, there remained wounds that still ached.

Dimly he began to want her; half for loyalty, because she had proved a sweet saviour; half for herself; but he hesitated and asked himself humble questions, natural to his character, and other questions, born of self-esteem. His humility doubted whether a man, who had loved another woman, could claim the right to ask for such a girl as Betsy at all. Surely one so fine, so clever, so lovable as she, might demand a first love and refuse the second place to any. His self-esteem challenged on another ground. What would the world think of a man who could console himself so swiftly for the great passion of his life?

As time went on, he came to feel a sense of obligation to certain people. Looking back he could see how hard they had tried to sustain and comfort him; how not a few men and women, according to their inspiration, had endeavoured to lighten his suffering. That Betsy had succeeded best there could be no doubt; and since that conclusion Warner found his mind continually occupied with the thought of her. He returned again and again to the problem of whether he could expect her to think twice of one who brought less than his first love to her; and this question took longer to solve than the others. As to what the world might think, Lidstone ultimately found himself indifferent. As soon as he began to feel a wish to offer marriage to Betsy, only one question remained to determine; and now there came a day when he solved it in his own favour. He honestly believed that something more than generosity and good will had made Betsy so patient, so thoughtful and so kind; and to support the opinion came Lucy's frank assertion. For on more than one occasion, when he expressed his admiration and great obligations, Lucy had plainly told him that her friend was moved to Warner, not only for his tribulations, but for himself. He declined to believe the assertion for a long while, but now his hope that it might be true led him to revive it.

He had decided to offer marriage to Betsy Neck; and while he now walked in the orchards awaiting her, for she was coming to dinner, Betsy herself approached in the determination to explain to Mary Lidstone that she must see less of Warner. She guessed that his mother's tact and delicacy would give the man a hint without hurting him. A word would be enough, and she could speak it in the ear of one who was swift to understand.

Warner strolled, full of his great thought, where, amid the twisted knees and elbows of branch and bough, the apple harvest began to flame in the livery of ripeness. From orange to crimson, from amber to sea-green the colour harmonies passed and intermingled in streaks and splashes and jewels of all ruddy and golden tints amid the ageing leaves. Apple scents crept over the lush grasses; where glades opened upon glade amid the tree trunks and distance shone out azure against the glow of the trees. It was a very great season. Already little hills of light began to glimmer on the ground, where the first fallen dotted the green. Gathered in heaps and mounds they shone shadowless, for each higher globe flung light on the bosom of its neighbour, so that the growing pyramids of fruit reflected radiance and sparkled unfretted by any shade.

Warner thought deeply as he strolled along, and for once there happened a rare thing. While the future might have been expected to chain every thought, memory chose to dominate him, and he turned far back and found himself in spirit a little boy, who had strutted happy here under networks of naked boughs in winter, beneath the translucent new foliage and the snow of opening blossom in spring; among the fruit at the fall. Here, he had climbed into the forks of the trees and plucked his first apple; here he had watched the shaky, new-born lambs, found his first bird's nest, carried the first primrose to his mother, chased the butterflies, harried small, suckling pigs and fled before the gaunt presence of the sow.

Mystery still haunted the orchards for his simple mind; they had held new songs and new wonders all his life. Indeed the things that had seemed obvious to childhood took on the colour of doubt when he came to adult understanding. There were secrets still whose solution escaped him.

Now, he returned in thought to his childhood, when life was so much easier to understand. The avenues of many autumns came together and seemed a mere link in time. He could awaken the feelings of early days on this particular day; and the gates of the past swung open for him to return into it. Small things smote most vividly into his mind. He could feel his heart beat faster at the onset of the boisterous, blue-eyed sheep-dog who stood as high as his shoulder then; he could remember the small hand stretching for nuts and blackberries; his awe in the presence of an old, long-vanished man—the Ladon of his father's orchards; his increased comfort when Ladon departed and left him in sole company of the trees.

Then he saw his mother through a glade, banished his dreams, and turned and came to her. She handled a broad rake and with deliberation drew the fallen fruit together. She gazed upwards sometimes and once touched a bending bough tenderly, as though she would ease the pain of such generous bearing. It was her hour, and her sturdy figure seemed full of dignity and meaning. Pomorum Patrona herself—the Lady of the Apples held her court, walking amid the scented garners; knowing that the magnificence of one prosperous tree and its payment in red gold for full share of rain and sunshine, was the magnificence of them all; feeling that each to her embodied all; holding all as one united care and joy.

"I've seen boughs clean broke, Warner," she said, pursuing her thoughts aloud. "Like a mother that dies in childbirth. A wonderful year—best I do think since your father's time."

"I'm going to meet Betsy," he said, and presently left her; while her thoughts roamed backward through the twilight of the past, as his had done.

Then came Miss Neck, and Warner took her by a rambling way, where none was likely to meet them.

"I'll find you one of mother's favourites," he said. "We call them 'lemons' but it's as sweet as sugar and just coming ripe."

She sat with him presently and ate a yellow apple. He was cheerful, but restless, and she observed that his thoughts seemed not on her, or the things she said. She hesitated to mention Gilyan's anxieties, but left that matter till a later hour. But presently he came to himself, as she rose from a fallen tree trunk, and begged her to sit down again for a little while.

In the silence that followed an apple fell near them, and the sound seemed to loosen Warner's tongue.

"Betsy," he said, "there's a great thought come to me these late days—so great that I almost laughed at it and put it away. But it won't be put away till I've told it out to you. And I'll thank you to be patient and hear it. I'm a know-nought fool and you have suffered me bravely, and made me think even 'twas gladly sometimes. But now I see a bit clearer, and I know how forbearing you have been—how wonderful to listen to my mournful speech so often and to bring balm to so many more bruises than you knew about. And now—now—seeing all you've done, and feeling all I've made you suffer, and all the hours and hours of your precious time I've took, and never thought in my selfishness what I was doing—now all I owe you have burned up into a sort of a fire inside me. And I've begun to know what I do owe and to feel such a gratitude as I've got no words to tell. And how I be going to pay? Only by asking for more and more."

Betsy was moved. She did not speak immediately but looked up into his red face and then looked down again. It was a face that had changed in the last six months and the large unshadowed calm was gone. She knew his countenance so well and she had seen the care come to it and the new lines about the forehead, that changed the expression of the eyes beneath it. She knew that her own dearest friend among women had wakened that care and graven those lines; and yet, while mourning with all her generous heart for Warner, she had never grown angered at Gilyan. She understood Gilyan so much better than Warner ever could; so much better than Lucy ever could. Long after the event, Gilyan had actually written to Betsy and described her actions and explained that the pretended suicide was entirely on Warner's account, and if she had not seen it with Gilyan's eyes, she had understood it as not all evil.

Even at this moment, when the joy of his proposal came upon her, Betsy mused on the strange fact that she loved him very dearly, and dearly loved the girl who had brought him his first great sorrow also. She was without pride. The fear at the man's heart, that she might resent the approach of one who had so recently loved another woman, influenced Betsy not at all. Her hesitation arose from a different aspect of the situation. She knew, of course, what he was going to say; and now he said it, for the reflections recorded took but a fraction of time to flash through her mind.

"If you felt you could even think about it, and not say 'no' out of hand, that would be great news to me, my dear. I love you—how humbly and yet how much I've got no words to tell. A shop-worn thing like me is a poor offering. I'm not worth your while and I know it. Yet I've got to tell you, and while I'm telling you, I want to beg and pray you'll see this is no more a case for your great, beautiful pity and tender understanding. That you can give and leave yourself none the poorer, because you shed that round you always, like the sun his light. But I'm asking now for something you can only give once—something greater than any part of you and that's all of you—all and for evermore, Betsy. And well I know the likes of me have little right to ask it. Could you give it a thought? Could you turn it over in your mind, or is it too wild altogether—too outrageous from your point of view? I've only got what I deserve if you say it is."

He stopped, and his method of putting the petition went no little way in answering her doubts. She had half suspected that Warner was asking her to marry him for the same reason that now took her to Mrs. Lidstone: a suspicion that he had seen too much of her and leaned too greatly upon her consolations. Such a man, suddenly awakened to his attitude, might out of a gentle and kindly spirit feel the debt incurred could only be paid in one way; and it had been Betsy's purpose to lighten any fear in that direction, while at the same time protecting herself from the voice of other people. But the need for such an act had vanished with his words and it was not only her love for him that determined her to say 'yes,' but his love for her. Nothing shadowed it to her delicate and sensitive ear. He wanted her, and she believed that he would never want her less than now, if once she wedded him. Love had illuminated her understanding of the man and she was conscious by sure instinct, that to him, as to none other she had ever known, it was in her power to be a precious helpmate.

"No need to think about it, Warner," she said, smiling at him with a glow on her cheeks and a thrill in her voice. "I love you very dearly—oh, so dearly—and I'll be proud and joyful to marry you."

"You mean it, Betsy? But I see you do—I see you do. Only I can hardly believe it—too big a thing."

"It's true—though I can hardly believe it either."

She was in his arms and returned his solemn kiss. Then, for a little while, they kept quite silent looking into each other's eyes.

Far away Mary Lidstone's white apron glinted through the trees and Betsy saw it.

"Come and tell your mother quick, while it's so new and fine," she said.

CHAPTER XX

BAD NEWS

THOUGH both James Woodley and his fellow worker, Arthur Partridge, had pursued the solemn business of offering marriage far from the Windmill of melancholy memory, yet tradition exercised its unconscious hold and there came a Sunday in August when Minnie Nosworthy and Arthur strolled to the wind-swept ruin, that he might write their initials together in the olden way. By a coincidence two others were concerned to do the like, and thus it happened that James Woodley and Melinda Wedlake suddenly peeped round the ragged portal of the entrance, while Arthur was seeking for a spot whereon to write.

They greeted each other with merriment, and of the four perhaps only Arthur was vexed. He remembered too acutely the last occasion of a visit to the Windmill, and guessed that it also occupied the placid mind of James. But the horseman was witty enough to keep silent concerning the past. The vision of that ancient reverse and its attendant incidents of ignominy offered no picture for the contemplation of Minnie or Melinda. Now an idea inspired Arthur.

"There ban't an inch of room within reach of our hands down here," he said; "but if I get on your shoulders, Jimmy, I can reach up where 'tis pretty clear and where I can write large; and when I've set me and Minnie up there, then you can climb on my shoulders and put yourself and Miss Wedlake up."

"Right," agreed James. "I'll just unray a bit, because

I don't want my coat spoiled; and you'd best to take off your boots, Arthur, because I ban't going to have you stand on my shoulders in your boots."

Arthur, rather pleased to reveal a pair of new purple socks, obeyed, and James removed his coat, his collar and his tie and gave them into the keeping of Melinda. Then with help, and much laughter from the maidens, Partridge ascended to the shoulders of Woodley and set his record on high, where all might read it. He then came down again and resumed his boots, while James took off a pair of shoes and, with less agility than the other, made shift to get upon his shoulders. The girls screamed with merriment and Arthur protested that James was breaking in his shoulder blades; but he carried himself with courage and stood firmly enough while the betrothed of Melinda scratched their initials and the date of the engagement. Having viewed the work with satisfaction they strolled away together and for a time, before the couples parted again, Melinda and Minnie walked side by side and the men, having stopped to light their pipes, went together some paces behind.

The future wives were old acquaintances and both of a practical bent.

"It's very nice, your James and my Arthur are such good friends," said Minnie, a fair, tall girl with small blue eyes and a little, tight mouth.

"Yes, it is," declared Melinda. "Your chap's more masterful than mine, I reckon; but then you're more masterful than me, so that'll be all right."

"Truth is we never know much good or bad about 'em till we've married 'em," answered Miss Nosworthy. "My Aunt Sophy says again and again to me to take Arthur with a pinch of salt and keep my great feeling for him well in bounds. Which I have done. Because it's better not to hope for too wonderful things. In fact it's better to keep your eyes steady on the seeming weaknesses; then, if the marriage turns out better than you expect, that's all to the good. But if you make up a picture of a man, largely on what he tells you about himself, then Aunt Sophy says 'tis pretty well any odds you'll be disappointed when you find yourself landed under the same roof with him and bound to his bed and board."

"My!" murmured Melinda, "that don't sound over and above cheerful."

"Reality have got to be faced," answered Minnie, "and it's better we should be agreeably disappointed with a man than disagreeably disappointed—ain't it? You see, if you and me say to ourselves, 'here's Arthur and James—very nice, good chaps full of virtue and in steady work and excellent health and likely to make proper husbands; but we don't know much about 'em except outside, and so we must keep our nerve and remember they be just human men like others'—if we say that, and don't expect to have no more luck than other married women, then, if we do have more luck, it's all gain. The best pleasure is what comes unexpected in the way of surprise, Melinda, and if we go into it expecting little, then the surprise of finding 'em far better than we hoped, will be very nice."

"You cast me down a good bit," answered the daughter of Septimus. "Here have I been thinking what a blessing it will be to get clear of my father's home and have one of my own. And I've got a tremenjous feeling for James, and love him better every minute; and now you——"

"No, I don't say a word to make you like him less. I think just as high of Mr. Partridge. I don't tell you not to hope. I only tell you not to hope too much. We've got all the other married people under our eyes, and we be made of the same stuff as the women, and James and Arthur be made of the same stuff as the men."

"Lor', Minnie! What a kill-joy you are!" cried the other girl. "Now I shall begin to pick holes in James—I know I shall."

"No call to do that. Your James is all right, and my Arthur's all right, and they reckon we're all right; but I've told Arthur just what I'm telling you and he's got the sense to see it. 'I'm an ordinary,' I told Arthur, 'not a saint nor nothing like that. I've got a temper and there's days when I'm better left alone.' "

Melinda found herself sighing. She turned to get a glimpse of James. He and Arthur were walking close together and Arthur appeared to be lecturing Mr. Woodley. Melinda challenged her friend.

"Sounds to me as if you didn't like Arthur a bit," she said. "What's the good of crying stinking fish to the man you're going to marry, and telling him you've got a temper and often be sulky and so on?"

"Every good, because then he haven't got the pang of finding it out and putting a black mark against my name."

"Well," answered Melinda, "I've been making myself out as nice as I could for Mr. Woodley, and he's been making himself out as nice as he could for me. And I like that sort of love-making best myself. It suits me and it suits him. And if I may say so, Minnie, I shouldn't strip yourself too bare for Mr. Partridge. Men are queer customers and he might take a turn against you. Do he tell you that he's got his faults? Because if you be doing all the confessing—however, no doubt you understand him pretty well. You see a man who have chose a woman fancies himself above a bit about it when she says 'yes'; and he don't want to hear his female run down—not even by herself. It pricks his pride."

It was Minnie's turn to ponder. They were silent and they heard the men mumbling behind them.

"You're quite right as to that," Jimmy was saying. "Only a know-nought fool would expect perfection in 'em. In our station of life us can't expect to get masterpieces—for why? Because we ain't masterpieces ourselves. All the same I've got a right to be hopeful, and nobody would offer for a woman he wasn't hopeful about.''

''I only say keep hope in bounds, because your judgment ain't built on a very high order of intellects,'' explained Arthur. ''The more brain, the more judgment, and so, without any feeling, you must grant I'm more likely to be right about Miss Nosworthy than you are about yours.''

''Not at all,'' argued James. ''Why the mischief do you want to run down my intellects, Arthur? Love ain't a matter of intellects, and the cleverest people often make a mistake in marriage and the go-by-the-ground people often do not.''

What Partridge might have replied matters little, for the girls had stopped where the road forked and Melinda was determined to escape from the bleak philosophy of her friend.

''We be going down to Withy Lease,'' she said to James, ''and they be going to Mr. Blake's farm to tea.''

In five minutes they had parted and Melinda was confiding her discomfit to her betrothed.

''Be blessed if I think Minnie cares a dish-clout for Arthur!'' she exclaimed indignantly. ''To hear her you'd say the only hope of marriage is to enter into it with none. Expect the very worst, and then less than the worst won't disappoint you; but what be the good of marrying at all if you only expect the worst?''

''No good,'' answered James. ''No good; and if Miss Nosworthy be going to expect the worst, I dare say Arthur will show it to her. To look for trouble be halfway to getting it in my experience. 'Tis funny that she should be taking that view, because Arthur is not. He seems to believe that a new heaven on earth be opening for him and Miss Nosworthy.''

''She don't.''

''I dare say the woman will give him an eye-opener,'' said James mildly. " 'Tis the fate of them vain chaps to find themselves up against it sometimes."

"I wanted to feel kindly to Arthur, because I owe him something in getting you to turn your attention on me," declared Melinda, "but if he thinks he's cleverer than you, that shows very clear he ain't."

James calmed his sweetheart. They descended the hill together and presently forgot Arthur Partridge and everybody else but themselves. Then they met Mark Fawden and found that optimistic soul in considerable distress. He wore his Sunday black, but was hastening from Withy Lease at no Sunday gait.

"Bad news," he began. "A telegram; and when you get up over middle age, a telegram nearly always means trouble in my experience. Mr. Harold Lidstone have fallen a lot worse and Gilyan wants somebody to go up. You're well met, because you can go quicker than me. Mrs. Purchase says she don't feel equal to all the business of a death-bed, though of course it may not be so bad as that, and I tell her it ain't. But I was going to Orchard Lands this instant moment for Mrs. Lidstone; and now you can do it. Say Jennifer's very wishful to see her if she can spare an hour, and will thank her gratefully to travel over to us for a cup of tea."

"Mrs. Lidstone to go to Mrs. Purchase for her tea, along of bad news from London," said James, who always liked to repeat a direction, that no mistake might be made.

"That's it. The tobacconist is a lot worse, and Jennifer, who knows only too well what consumption of the lungs be, doubts not he've had what they call a hemorrhage. And Gilyan's with child, and so another generation is threatened, and something have got to be done."

They parted and Melinda listened to James upon the situation.

"A sad come-along-of-it," he said, "and I'm terrible sorry to hear of such bad luck. Be I walking too fast for you?''

''No, I can slip along very quick. I've often had to, doing chores for father.''

''I always said the man was too pinnicking to be married. A very kindly sort of man, but high-coloured and not enough nature in him. She'll be in a miz-maze, Gilyan will, because she's never had to face death.''

''She tried to bring on her own, however.''

''That's past and gone. You mustn't think of that. For all her faults you couldn't quarrel with her—along of something in her.''

''She was a lot too lovely for men to quarrel with, I expect.''

''She was the sort you felt somehow didn't ought to be brought to trouble. Wilful and terrible headstrong and all that; but her eyes and her voice cried out for her. Who could shoot a bird while it was singing its little song, Melinda? To handle that pretty woman rough would be just as bad.''

''She's got a way with her no doubt. She had you chaps all tumbling over each other to catch her eye and win a word. I never knew her. Women hadn't much use for her, though now she'll have use for them. Men for her fun, women for her trouble. There's a lot like that.''

''Don't speak against her,'' said James. ''She'll be a davered* rose now and there may be difficulty for her if her husband dies. He's young to die and I dare say haven't had time to save money for her; and he couldn't insure his life—I know that—because Matthew Fawden told me so. But there it is. They came together like two tongues of a flame of fire, and now she may be a widow afore you and me are married.''

''She'd look like a black fairy in weeds,'' said Melinda.

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* *Davered.* Faded.

They met Mary Lidstone a moment later and gave her Mark's message. But she was already on the errand.

"Not half an hour ago," she said, "Betsy Neck happened down from 'Church House.' She'd had a telegram likewise. And she will be the one to go up tomorrow. That'll suit best; and if after that there's anything we can do, of course we shall. I'm going now to Withy Lease to tell Jennifer about it. I couldn't feel sure if Gilyan had let her know at all, any more than she let us."

" 'Twas 'Frog' told me just now," explained James. "He was traapsing along for you so fast as he could, because Mrs. Purchase was crying out for you, ma'am."

Mary left them and reached Withy Lease twenty minutes afterwards.

Jennifer was in her little garden moving fretfully up and down. She wore a lavender-coloured sun-bonnet, but her gown was always black.

"I knew you'd come—I knew you'd come, Mary. My God! What have I done to be cursed forever with this thing? Her husband dying of it, I reckon, and her child doomed to it afore 'tis born. And he swore to me he was all right and only wanted to be careful; and me, like a fool, not believing my own sense of sight. Them high-built shoulders and flat chest and dazzling bright eyes—they always mean *it?*"

"The last news was better and the cream did him a lot of good—so Gilyan wrote to Betsy a bit ago. But now the crash be there, I expect. I doubt he'll have to leave London and get back to clean air and soft water and so on."

"Well, I can't go. I'm too old. I don't want to see no more people die of consumption. Christ knows I've seen enough."

"Of course you can't go. Betsy's going up tomorrow. She will look sharp after Gilyan and they'll have a trained nurse for Harold, I expect—till he's better."

"He ain't going to get better," said Jennifer. "I've got what you might call a second sight in these matters. A fortnight ago, when Betsy heard tell he was bad, I said to Mark Fawden, 'Mark,' I said, ' 'tis the beginning of the end.' He scoffed in his way, being a man whose god is hope; but I knew."

"I grant nobody can tell you much about consumption of the lungs," answered Mary; "but you must remember the world gets cleverer and the doctors know more than they did five-and-twenty years ago. We did ought to hope always when there's a right to hope, and this is a case for it, because I expect it has been took in time."

But Mrs. Purchase saw no light.

"There's nothing to do but look forward," she answered; "and I can't say what may be in store. He never named his affairs to me, nor yet to Gilyan, and I only know that she's gone out of her way in more letters than one to explain money was tight and business not so brisk as it ought to be, owing to labour troubles. God knows I didn't want a penny from her, but she wrote as if she thought I did, and I answered pretty sharp and she didn't write no more."

"Don't you be suspicious, my dear. You mustn't read motives into things where none was meant. I wish we saw each other oftener, because you want a bit of cheering sometimes, and so do I."

"I won't pretend," said the old woman. "How should you find me a one to cheer anybody?"

"It would help your sight if you looked at life through other people's eyes now and again. You're a woman with a wide experience and could often advise them who haven't got so much. I'd well like to see more of you, only we're such a busy pair. There's a fine Bible text you might not know. My husband was very fond of saying it. 'A faithful friend is the medicine of life.' "

" 'Medicine!' " shrilled Jennifer. "I don't want no more of that. Haven't my whole days been medicine ever since I was married?"

"Medicine ain't always nasty."

"I ask you this. Where are we if Gilyan's back along with me presently—her a widow and her child fatherless? Then what's the sense of coming to me and axing me to be cheerful faced with that?"

"You're not," answered Mrs. Lidstone. "In sober honesty you're not faced with that at present, and if you must run on into the hidden future, you may just as well give it a chance. You never give the future fair play, Jennifer."

"Well for you to talk. If you can trust the future, by all means do so. I never could, and I ain't going to begin now. My future's been worse than my present all my life, and experience tells me that it will go on to the bitter end. You say 'hope,' and I do hope. And all I've got left to hope is that my future's like to be short. And the less of it the better."

Feeling herself of no avail in Jennifer's present mood, Mary left her.

"Betsy will be along with them soon after noon tomorrow," she said, "and I'll bid her to write that very night to you, so you'll quickly hear so near the truth as she can find out. Meanwhile try and be patient, Jennifer. Fretting won't better Harold and it won't better you neither. And a thing I'd forgot. Your meadow gate's all to pieces and the bridge by the big alder, where we come over to you from Lower Marldon side, is not much better. You'd best to tell Mark to get a new gate and put a bit of timber in here and there."

"Yes, and where be I going to find timber or new gates? It's always my hand in my empty pocket now."

Mary went her way. At home she returned to Warner and Betsy, and their talk through the evening meal concerned only their relations in London.

Betsy strove to be hopeful, but Warner was not. He remembered a thousand incidents of Harold's visit to Orchard Lands and declared, as Mrs. Purchase had declared, that his cousin was probably going to die.

"And then where will that woman find herself?" he asked.

"On her feet, as she always have done," replied Lucy; whereupon her brother reprimanded her.

"Be in charity," he said. "This is no time to bear malice. If the worst happens she may come back to her old home with a broken heart, and it won't become you, or any other woman, Lucy, to harbour old wrongs against her."

"I shan't harbour nothing against her," replied his sister, "and why you're in such a hurry to kill off Harold I don't know."

Warner saw Betsy back to 'Church House' when night had fallen. Removed from his family he found himself freer to discuss the situation of his former sweetheart, and Betsy felt a curious sensation almost akin to perplexity as he ran on. His arm was around her waist while they ascended the dark and empty lane; but his speech was concerned with Gilyan.

"Write full and clear to me; and don't put off anything she may say. She's proud, and she'll be pretty sure to pretend there's tons of money even if it isn't so. But get to the bottom of that, and if she's short of ready cash, be sure to tell me. Of course he may be clear in his mind and able to sign cheques and so on; but if he isn't and she's put about, I don't want a thing like that to add to her sufferings. Let me know and I can wire up fifty pounds in a few minutes. Be sure to mention the point."

"I will then," promised Betsy.

"And you'll keep an eye on her too, won't you? A woman in her case didn't ought to have to kill herself waiting on a sick man. Don't you let her do it. If he's so ill as it sounds, you order in a professional nurse and I'll pay the costs. Gilyan will have to be in the shop no doubt; but if the work is more than she ought to be asked to do, you stop it, Betsy."

"Be sure I'll think for her all I can."

"There's nobody else to think for her," he declared. "I believe his relations, such as they are—his mother's people and not known to us—thought Harold had gone below him a bit for his wife. Fools! As if any man could go below himself to win such as she. But you can safely look to my mother, and she'd come up I'm very sure if you said she was wanted. Gilyan's grandmother is past. She's no use."

He continued volubly for a time, then seemed dimly to perceive in Betsy's lengthened silences that she awaited other words, and began to talk of themselves.

"It's like your pluck to dash off tomorrow. Who is there but you would do it? I'll drive along in my own trap an hour or more before train starts and take you to the station," he promised.

CHAPTER XXI

BETSY'S LETTER

BETSY was sitting beside the couch of Harold in a little parlour behind his tobacco shop. This chamber had been turned into a bedroom for him, and here he stopped, that he might be within reach of the counter, to tell Gilyan, who served at it, anything she wanted to know. He had dressed today, for the first time since a severe hemorrhage, and was weary with the exertion. A nurse still attended him, but while she was taking her daily constitutional, Betsy always stopped with the sick man. Today he showed a great indifference to living and revealed a touch of remorse—a rare phenomenon in him.

"I oughtn't to have married, I suppose. But you know how Gilyan works on one. She made me physically better from the moment I first saw her. There's no doubt about that. From the hour I fell in love with her, I forgot all about my health and my business and everything else in the world but her. Love often makes you forget what you ought to remember."

"Don't you talk to make yourself cough."

"I'm all right today—only tired with dressing. I'm building up; but the truth is, Betsy, there's nothing to be gained by tinkering now. I can't tell Gilyan and you mustn't; but the longer I hang on like this, the worse for her. It's only wasted money and more debts afterwards."

"Nonsense. All that will come right when you get well."

"I'm not going to get well. In confidence I may tell you that there's nothing to sell here when I go. No assets—practically none, and the goodwill means nothing worth money with competition all round me. I've been going back a lot here ever since I took that long holiday last spring. It's a case for a clean cut. Must cut a loss and there's only one way to do it—for Gilyan's sake and my child's too.''

''Perhaps you might start again in a better climate, like doctor said. He thought the Cape of Good Hope was the place for you. If it could be managed for you to get there before the bad weather, you might look round and find an opening.''

''There's an opening all right,'' he answered. ''You can always make one good opening—however poor and weak you are. And that's in the cemetery.''

''You must hope for Gilyan's sake. You may get strong again in a few months.''

''There's no inducement to try. I love Gilyan very well and all that, and I'd like to have welcomed our child into the world; but I'm sporting: I don't want sentiment to bitch up their future. 'Cut a loss' is the word—for their sakes, Betsy.''

''You'd break her heart if she heard you, Harold.''

''Not a chance! My precious girl's heart ain't built to break. It's hard as steel, though perhaps not as true as steel. Yet I won't say that. She's all right; but she must have a lot more than I can do for her. There's some men was never meant for one woman, and there's a good few women never meant for one man—too grand and spacious in their ideas. I dare say, if I'd lived, that Gilyan would have found that a poor, tottering ruin weren't all she wanted, or had the right to demand for her share out of life.''

''I never pay no attention when I hear a man grumbling about his wife,'' she answered, patting Harold's white hand as she spoke. ''You know as oft as not he's only play-acting, to try and interest another woman in him. But it's no good, Harold. I know you and I know Gilyan a lot too well to be took in. What would you say if anybody else spoke hard things against her? I know very well. She worships you and has no thought but you. Never was a pair loved each other dearer; and you must do your part and be honest with the doctor and the nurse and strive all you know to get well for her sake. Gilyan's wonderful and love's made her so. That brave and patient."

"It's easy to be brave and patient when you know you've got fortune and future on your side. She'll come out top because she's built to do so. When you get loveliness like hers along with cleverness like hers and the understanding of men she's got—not by experience—but by deep-rooted instinct—when you've got all that, triumph is only a question of time. But to be brave and patient when you know—however, I don't want to yelp. I've had my luck. She's made my life worth while; but I'm only a passing adventure in hers."

"Be quiet," said Betsy. "Be quiet and listen. Life for Gilyan would be a blank without you. If you think you're not everything and your life not more precious to her than her own, you wickedly wrong her. I saw her love for you from the start, remember. I know that she hadn't begun to live and feel till she met you. You talk of other men. No man, of all the men that were after her before she heard your name—not one ever really made her think twice about 'em. Take my dear Warner—I do believe that she thought she loved him well enough to marry him. Indeed that's sure—else she never would have said 'yes' to him. But there was not a shadow of real love for him in Gilyan's heart. She saw that clear enough the moment you came along. You're her world, and it's up to you, for her sake, more than your own, to do everything in your power to get well again."

"I'm not her world: I'm only one of her worlds. However, all you say is very true, no doubt. She thinks just as you do and she loves me dearly. But neither you nor she can look on ahead clear-eyed for the minute. Too kind—I know that—so I've got to look on ahead for her. And I know what I see. I've had a good time, if it was a short one. I've got a lot to be thankful for: a rare piece of luck was Gilyan. I dare say a lot of men would agree to die, if they could live with her for a year first.''

''You're going to live with her for a great many years, please God. The talk must all be of getting well. For the next year you've got to be quiet though.''

''I shall be quiet enough. But there—I can't explain: you're too close to Gilyan to understand. There are different ways of showing your love for a person. I'll grant that the very best thing of all would be for me to get well and strong. And if it is to be, it is. I won't lift my hand against nature, Betsy, if nature's going to lift her hand for me. The rest I'll leave unspoke. Time will tell the answer.''

She brought him food and he ate a little.

''Health and strength—what brave words,'' he said. ''But, from where I am now, they look as far off as the stars.''

''You're well enough to want to be better—that's something,'' she answered, and he granted it was so.

''Yes—honestly I want to be better now. But——''

''No 'buts,' Harold. The will is the thing. You must have the will.''

He drowsed presently and slept peacefully while she opened a fan and let it play. The room was hot, for London scorched in August sunshine.

Presently a strange thing happened and tears began to steal down Betsy's brown face. More sorrows than one contributed to them, for she was in the shadow not only of grief for Gilyan and her husband, but a sort of mystery involving herself, from which she had striven in vain so far to escape. She loathed her present environment, a fact that may have contributed to lowering of vitality; but not

London and its grime and din would have made her shed tears, and perhaps neither one nor other of the present discouragements if taken alone. Together, however, they had combined to cast the cheerful spirit down, and not her own personal great happiness and content were strong enough to brace her against the circumstances wherein she was now entangled. Indeed a large part of the confusion seemed to aim directly at her own happiness and involve her in a complication above her intelligence to understand, but not beyond her heart to feel. She could not have defined her emotions and was herself astonished at the tears upon her cheek. She strove to bring reason to bear upon her problems; she asked herself what had created her mood of depression; and for her own enlightenment she stated the causes one by one. It was a habit with Betsy to define causes when overcome by any rush of incidents and thrown from her customary, balanced attitude of mind.

First, then, was Harold and his state. She did not know until this hour that he realised how ill he was; but she had heard from his wife how his affairs were involved and unsatisfactory. The doctor had told her and Gilyan that the man must have been ill for a much longer time than they imagined, and that he had possibly concealed the truth, not only from his wife, but himself, as those who suffered from his malady were apt to do. The medical man took a grave view of the case and warned Gilyan that her husband, even if life was prolonged by favourable new conditions, would always be delicate. He might live in a healthy environment for years; he might even regain a measure of his strength and stem the disease; but it was not probable. His sudden and severe loss of blood had reduced him to immediate danger, and his temperament was against him. Harold continued anxious, not for himself, but for his responsibilities. He did not mend hopefully. But it was necessary for those about him to maintain hope, and Gilyan and Betsy strove with all their might to create a cheerful atmosphere around the sick man. The strain both felt, and in Gilyan's case her tribulations were increased by her passionate love for the sick man and the burden that she bore. He wronged her harshly when he doubted her devotion.

But for Betsy there had appeared another and a personal complication apart from her own solicitude over Harold and deep concern on account of his wife. It had culminated that morning in the shape of a letter from Warner. The letter was in her pocket and, for the fourth time since she had received it, Betsy now read her lover's note again. She brought it out, opened it on her knee and then, while she fanned with her right hand, turned the pages with her left.

Thus wrote Warner:

"Orchard Lands,
Lower Marldon,
S. Devon.

"My dearest Betsy,

"It is a great relief to all our minds to know you are with poor Harold and Gilyan at this trying time. And I am proud to see how thankful everybody who is interested in the matter feels that it should be you who are there. There is nobody like you in a fix and I feel a great comfort every time I remember that Gilyan has got you to rely upon in her terrible trial. I don't believe I could ever have let you go to anybody else, but she is different—so utterly alone in the world except for you and, in a way, for me. That is if she is to be left a widow. But, though you say in your last that hope is not dead, I feel pretty certain of what is going to happen. Of course I cannot pretend to feel any particular regard for Harold, though I would cure him tomorrow both for his wife's sake and his own, if I could; but for Gilyan, as you know, I must always share your feeling, and if you are willing, I shall make it my business with your help to see that no misfortunes come to her that can be avoided. No doubt such a beautiful woman will not have to wait long before she finds a husband worthy of her; but meanwhile, if as you said to me privately in your last, Harold has nothing worth mentioning to leave her but debts, then it may be a privilege for me to lend a hand. I'm sure you would wish it.

"If money is tight, let me know. You do not say she wants any, but if you reckon she is pinched, be sure to tell me. She has enough on her mind at present without the additional worry of being hard up. If you think she oughtn't to work in the shop, advise getting in an assistant for a time. But well I know you'll be cleverer at thoughts for her than I can be, or anybody.

"I expect Devonshire cream and such like would be just as good for her as for him. It would be a rare good thing if he could travel so far as Devonshire and come down to Torquay or somewhere; but no doubt, apart from his health, that couldn't be worked at present. I might run up from Saturday till Monday if you'd like me to. In fact I've pretty well determined to do it. Then we'd buy that ring—and the wedding ring too while we're about it. The days are mighty long without you and I feel it jolly bad luck losing you almost the very minute after I'd had the blessing to win you.

"You are seldom out of my mind, Betsy, and I wouldn't spare you to anybody but Gilyan and only to her because I know your great feeling for her. You and I are the two people who understand her best. I've always felt the folk forgot how young she was and expected a lot more from her than they had a right to expect. She seems a sort of shadow to me now—a little thing compared to you—and I often wonder how it all was and whatever made her think she loved me. When the real thing came along, of course, the scales fell from her eyes. For she was brave and honest as the light and made no false pretences when she knew and felt the truth. Her love for Harold was a grand love, for she never could do anything by halves, and once she found herself, she was sure to go from strength to strength. But it's cruel that her dreams of happiness should be broken so soon and I do wish I could think with you, that the cloud has a silver lining for her. Anyway we'll do our part.

"Take care of yourself as well as her, Betsy, my precious girl. I know how you hate bricks and mortar and what a trial it is for you to be stewed up in London, of all hateful places, these red-hot days; but no doubt it won't last long. I shall only wait another week and then, if you can't name the day when you'll be home again, I shall come up-along. But if that happens, you'd best to see if they'd care about my coming to see them. They might not. All the same I think they will now.

"Tell Gilyan her grandmother is all right; but don't tell her that Mrs. Purchase is positive Harold is going to pass away. She told mother that so soon as she set eyes on my poor cousin, she saw death written in his face. I dare say it's only talk, for she's old and cranky and grows a bit tootlish sometimes; but that's what she says. And if it's true, why didn't she speak at the time and warn Gilyan from her great experience, that she was risking her happiness and perhaps her own life and certainly the life of any childer she might have, by marrying a man with delicate lungs? But the old are selfish and I believe—though it seems a hateful thing to say—that as age advances we lose our good qualities sooner than our bad. And that's why old people are so infernally difficult sometimes. Not all though. I must ask your father about that.

"He's very well and very busy. Plenty of holiday people about. I saw Mrs. Woodley yesterday and she sent a lot of kind messages, and so do mother and Lucy.

"We shall be drowned in cider this year and I hope you will be back long before we begin crushing. Mother lives out of doors.

"I am sending along some nice sweet apples today. Make Gilyan eat some of them. I suppose they're not much use to poor Harold.

"Don't forget about the money.

"But I must close now, else you'll be weary of my writing. But I love writing to you, though such a poor penman to everybody else.

"I'd write a line to Gilyan direct if you think it would be any comfort to her to know how much my mother is thinking upon her. I expect mother has wrote for that matter.

"My dear love and a hundred kisses, darling Betsy,
"From your loving
"WARNER."

She put the letter away. Harold slept easily and there was no sound but the dull murmur of London round about her and the whisper of the fan.

She reflected and passed from one mood into another. Her thoughts were entirely with Warner, yet a sense of helplessness crowded down upon her. The letter was much like two others she had already received, but it accentuated their tenor: it carried the obvious impulsion of Warner's mind a step farther. She put the point into a question and asked herself how often the word "Betsy" occurred in her sweetheart's communication, how often the word "Gilyan."

"There's one thing about him," she reflected, "he'll never deceive anybody. He'll never hide his heart. Not that that makes it any better—only clearer."

Her steadfast good sense and courage presently strove to frame a cheerful view of Warner's letter. It was obvious enough that he had written in complete unconsciousness of his own pre-possession. He had neither weighed his words nor his emotions as he let his pen run. Ingenuously he set down thought upon thought, as it came—all animated with large sympathy and good will. She could not charge self-interest against him, or any desire deliberately to let her know how deeply Gilyan's prospects interested him. He had scribbled from his heart, and his head had seen no fault with his manner of stating his ideas. Then why should Betsy see any fault? If she wrote back one word to suggest that his letter, following others like it, had startled and hurt her, the shock to the man must be painful in the extreme. Yet, if she made no sign, future letters might undermine all peace.

Gilyan came in carrying a bottle.

"It's one o'clock and I've shut the shop till half past two," she whispered, seeing that her husband slept. "Nurse will be back in a minute. Then we'll eat."

She looked well, though the light-hearted sparkle of her eyes was gone. They were heavy and weary. She wore a black dress and a white blouse. From her breast she took a gardenia.

"That terror, Mr. Winslow, the wine merchant down the street," she whispered. "Would take it out of his buttonhole and put it in there. But he brought me a bottle of his very best port for Harold, so I had to wear it."

"I hate him," answered Betsy. "He's like one of the brown toads from Withy Lease."

Gilyan put the flower in a vase beside her husband's couch where stood some roses. Then she went out to the kitchen, and after she was gone, Betsy took the exotic and flung it from the window into the yard beneath. Immediately afterwards the sick man's nurse returned, nodded with satisfaction to see that her patient slept, and dismissed Betsy, who joined Harold's wife.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CHALLENGE TO SOCIETY

"It's like this," said Septimus Wedlake. "You know Andrew Baker—him we call Andy, the shoe-smith? Well, his wife's fed up with him. And what's much more to the point, he's fed up with her."

"Everybody knows that, father," answered Melinda, and James nodded in agreement. He had come, at Mr. Wedlake's express orders, that he might hear an important piece of news.

"Very well then," continued Septimus. "Now tighten your nerves, Jimmy, because I'm going to tell you something outside your experience, and we all know how anything outside your experience flusters you. It's like this: me and Jane Baker are very much addicted to one another, and we've ordained to join forces. In a word she's going to leave Andy and coming to live with me."

"Father!" cried Melinda faintly.

"Yes, I know all about that," replied the elder. "It's rather an eye-opener for the Marldons, but so be many things that happen, and the larger world don't wink an eyelash at 'em. Here's three middle-aged to old people—Jenny's fifty-four—and as her and Andrew feel the fag end of their lives might represent a good deal of contentment apart, but will only bring their grey hairs with sorrow to the grave in company, they separate—very wisely. As for Andrew, he knows his own business and, no doubt, in fulness of time he'll do the needful; but meanwhile, as me and Jane find ourselves wonderful suited, she's coming to me."

"Good powers! the scandal, Mr. Wedlake!" murmured James. "'Twill upheave the parish."

"And what then? Why for should the upper people have all the scandals, Jimmy? They live on divorces. 'Tis almost the only real fun they understand, except hoss-racing and playing cards. The scandal—so to call it—be none of my making, nor yet Mrs. Baker's. The scandal lies in the law of the land, that forbids three honest folk to behave as their good sense and judgment prompts. Granted Mrs. Baker comes to keep house for me so soon as Melinda be gone. That's all right; but until the scandal's noised abroad, Andy can do nought. Then he'll get his bill of divorcement against Jane and I shall marry her. And the scandal ain't our creation at all. 'Tis the heathen. filthy law that won't let them two nice people free of each other without demanding that one of 'em should live in sin for a bit first. 'Sin' they call it, and the beastly lawyers make dirty money out of the wickedness that they order their victims to commit. And men that call themselves gentlemen take that money! The lawyers have got their poisonous claws into our very hearts—blast 'em—and the nation lets it go on."

"At your age, Mr. Wedlake," moaned Jimmy.

"And at hers," added Melinda.

"'Age'!" answered Septimus. "You poor creatures don't know the meaning of age. Age be a matter of life, not years. Age have got nothing to do with love, and in such a manly pattern of man as me, while there's life there's love. 'Tis only the poor, weedy, indoor wretches lose their fires at sixty, or sooner. In my case—far from it. My second sap be running so strong as in an oak tree. So me and Mrs. Baker be going to get on with it in the name of our fine natures, and as for the Marldon people, 'twill give them a chance for their Christian charity, of which we hear so much and see so little."

"You can't expect good Christians to be charitable. 'Tis axing too much," declared James.

" 'Twill break my heart, father," said Melinda.

"Oh, no it won't. And if it do, Jimmy can mend it."

"So like as not James will go back on our wedding. How can you ask a religious man such as him to suffer a father-in-law like you?"

"I didn't ask him," answered Mr. Wedlake. "I suppose James have got his share of sense, and he'll want more than his share if you be going to play the fool, Melinda."

"As for that," declared Woodley, "you must allow for the shock. You've burst this upon this girl and me also, and though for my part I very much disapprove of it, because it's contrary to the church and very ill-convenient in a nice quiet place like this, still I see you ain't so much asking my view as telling me your intentions."

"Exactly so," replied Septimus. "There's nothing on God's earth that matters much less to middle age than the opinions of youth, Jimmy. In fact, without any feeling, I do assure you that your opinions are far less to me than the twitter of a bird on a bough. And I hope, when what I tell you is soaked into your understanding, you'll take it in your own large spirit; and if you don't, it matters not a farthing damn to anybody. As for Melinda, she knows Mrs. Baker, and I will swear she knows nothing but good about her. Come, Melinda."

"Nothing—till this minute," confessed his daughter.

"That's why the thought jars you," explained her parent. "In twenty-four hours you'll be looking at our arrangements as a thing only waiting for a bit of time—same as James looks at the cider-making."

"Never," declared Melinda. "I shall go on fire all over whenever I look at her."

"That's how I go," answered her father. "Well, there it is. And you can't say I haven't been open and aboveboard, as I always am when life allows me to be."

James rose.

"I'll be getting on," he said. "I'm such a one for law and order, Mr. Wedlake, that this have took me off my balance; but no doubt I shall upright again come bymeby."

"No doubt you will, James; and when you see the matter in its proper light, you can let in the light on Melinda also."

"Never," repeated she. "There's no light; and I shall pray on my knees for it not to happen, father. So I warn you."

"The prayer or a narrow-minded virgin won't get far," prophesied Septimus. "You pray not to be selfish, Melinda; you pray for a bigger heart and a larger understanding of reality. However, I'm not afeared of you, nor yet of your prayers. A time is coming, thanks to Jimmy here, when you'll know more about the men—your good father included."

James took leave of Melinda at the door and out of earshot.

" 'Tis more than time you was took from the evil to come," he whispered; then he crept into the night. But it being still early, and feeling in need of human sympathy under this stress, he proceeded to the 'Church House.'

He ordered refreshment and listened awhile to the buzz at the bar. Then he broke his news in the shape of a question.

"What's this I hear from Septimus Wedlake about Mrs. Baker?" he asked. "I got it from my future father-in-law himself, worse luck, and he didn't seem to think there was anything private about it. But sometimes we fear to believe our own ears, Paul Neck."

A few laughed.

"I lay you heard clear enough. Sep never leaves any doubt of his meaning," said Arthur Partridge, who was of the company. "I didn't tell you the rumour, because I reckoned it would cast you down, James," he added. "But since you've had it from the old blade himself, us may take it for true."

"Can such things happen in the Marldons?" asked James helplessly.

"Certainly," replied Paul. "Such things happen every day of the week, because we are law-abiding, and the law demands 'em, well knowing it fattens on such problems as on no others. For once Sep is going to keep well inside the law—out of respect, no doubt, for Mrs. Baker. However, the less said by us the better. All who wish the parties well can keep their mouths shut."

The subject, however, proved too racy for silence and those present were still discussing it when Septimus himself appeared. He marked the sudden cessation of speech as he entered and guessed the reason.

"Ah! Here's Jimmy I see supporting nature after getting the shock of his life. Thought I'd find him—fine fellow! One with me, Neck? I know what you birds was quacking about so well as if I'd heard you. I see it in James's eye. But don't nobody stop on my account. It interests me so much as any among you."

James was conscious that not a few shared his indignation at the situation Mr. Wedlake proposed to create. Feeling their support behind him he now spoke:

"Since we've met again tonight, I'll remind you about the future. 'Vengeance is mine,' the Lord says; and what do you think you'll look like, Septimus Wedlake, when your days are done and you go behind the veil, same as we all must?"

"I shall go behind the veil quite cheerful when I've got to," answered the elder. "And I shan't crawl behind the veil on my belly neither, nor yet touch my forelock to every swanking angel that comes along. Bunkum is bunkum, Jimmy, no matter what high-fashioned name you try to hide it under. And as for religion—what's the truth about that? A profit and loss account; and we spend half our time faking the books. But what's the use of trying to fox the Recorder? His ledger be the only one they'll read at Judgment—eh, Paul?"

"No religion in the bar is my golden rule, Sep," declared Mr. Neck, "but what you say has got a pinch of truth to it. We do fake; because we're too kind to our own motives. We can always find a good motive handy for every beastly thing we do."

"Most people can rely upon their own motives," said Septimus, "though experience teaches 'em to despair of their neighbours. My motives in marrying Mrs. Blake be just exactly the same as yours, Paul, in marrying Mrs. Woodley. In a word, the highest motives possible, and above suspicion. And if my task is a bit harder than yours and more open to the malice of knaves and the bleating of idiots, like Jimmy here, that's only because you be marrying a woman whose husband is dead and I'm marrying one whose husband is alive. There didn't ought to be any great difference among civilized and reasonable beings; but so it is—if you're poor."

Mr. Neck seldom laughed, but he laughed now and others echoed his amusement.

Matthew Fawden entered the bar.

" 'Tis you I want, Wedlake," he said, "and your girl have told me where to look. Hope you ban't leading James astray already."

"Not me, my dear," answered Septimus. " 'Twould take a long sight more time and trouble than I can spare to lead Jimmy out of the narrow path. In fact, for the narrow mind, the narrow path's the only safe one."

They spoke aside together presently and Mr. Wedlake learned that he might come to Orchard Lands for the cider-making in a month's time or thereabout, if he desired to do so.

"We want half a dozen pairs of hands just then, as you know," said Matthew. "And you came along two years ago and did your work all right and was none the worse for our money, I believe."

"This ain't your idea, however?" asked Septimus

"It is not," replied Fawden promptly. "I don't like you, because we be as far apart as chalk from cheese. You live a crooked life in my opinion; but that's not here or there. Mrs. Lidstone wishes for me to make the offer and I do so."

"It was very pleasant two years agone and why not again? How do the money run?"

"Same as before."

An idea struck the older man.

"I shouldn't be put under my son-in-law to be, should I? I know he stands well down-along; but it wouldn't be vitty for me to come and go at his order—you see that?"

"You'll answer to nobody but me."

"Good," replied Septimus. "That'll suit first rate. I shall be there, Matt; and you'll see me stand to work with the youngest. In fact, our generation knows a darned sight more about work than most of the boys. Proper work-shy the lot of 'em—work-shy but wages-greedy."

Matthew showed no enthusiasm.

"There's no shirkers with us. 'Tis understood you come mid-October or thereabouts."

Then Mr. Wedlake winked and drew Matthew.

" 'Tis pheasant time, but I dare say I'll find a way to please everybody—poulterers included."

The other snorted.

"You're a damned rogue!" he said.

"And now come and have a drink," begged Septimus; but Mr. Fawden declined.

"Not with you," he answered. "I won't have no man saying that you and me harbour together, even in a public house."

Talk became general and Mr. Neck discussed the subject of Harold Lidstone, concerning whom had come better news.

"He's thought to be a shade stronger by all accounts and he's turning over plans to get away from London before winter. And Betsy reckons to be home in a fortnight now. And time she was, for there's a deal to be thought upon with my wedding in the air. Warner Lidstone is going up to see 'em, I believe, and may bring my daughter home with them."

"Be your date fixed?" asked Septimus. "Because, so far as I learn, a good few others hang upon it."

"Mrs. Woodley is to name the day come Sunday," answered Paul; "and why for should others hang upon it?"

"They don't," said Matthew. "They hang upon the work. For our sins we be all messed up in this marrying disaster, and I've said plain and once for all, that I'll have no weddings and nonsense till after the cider-making be finished and the doors of the mill-house put home again."

"One would think cider was more important than marriage to hear you, Matt," said Mr. Neck. "I'm sure Mrs. Lidstone don't."

"A plague on marriage," growled the cider-man. "You can't see it with my eyes, because you don't look forward same as I do. For where shall we be at Orchard Lands? Master took off, and Partridge going into it, and this amorous wretch, James here. And we all know how marrying changes the nature and ruins the outlook and makes nine men out of ten cowards. Haven't I seen it from the outside? 'Tis we bachelors know best about the state, because we look all round it. A married man, so oft as not, be like a dog with a tin can tied to his tail. It bumps and bumps, and he gets wilder and wilder under the trouble till, presently, he don't know where to run or where to look for peace. And then, if he weren't mad before, he goes mad, and his usefulness, such as it may be, is spoiled. And what's going to happen at Orchard Lands with all these damned women clacking and quarrelling behind the scenes I'm mazed to think.''

''You be narrow as a knife, my dear,'' replied Septimus, glad of the opportunity. ''You won't neighbour with me, same as the screech owl won't neighbour with the honest daylight birds; and that's not my loss be it as it will; but being a man with more sense in my little finger than what you've got in your head, I do assure you that your view of womankind is a sin and a shame. You're a terrible unfinished creature, Matt. 'Tis too late no doubt to hope one of 'em would take you in hand if she was paid to do so; but——''

A policeman put his head through the door.

''Closing time, Mr. Neck,'' he said.

As they walked home together, James Woodley grumbled to the indignant Matthew.

''You hadn't ought to call me 'a amorous wretch,' Mr. Fawden,'' he said. ''I'm no such thing, and all the great men in the land be married but you. There's no outstanding sort of important men that bide bachelors, and you know it.''

''Be quiet and shut your mouth, James,'' snapped the other. ''But this I will say: the chap who is going to take that hateful Wedlake's daughter will get it in the neck before he's much older. So you can look out.''

''Not at all,'' answered Jimmy with spirit. ''I shan't get it in the neck, and there's a wide gulf fixed between Septimus Wedlake and my future wife. And after we're married, we have no truck with him whatsoever.''

''So you think now in your empty innocence,'' answered Matthew scornfully. ''You wait.''

CHAPTER XXIII

CIDER

THE orchards lay like jewels in the lap of autumn and the ambit of the lands round about added another beauty to this vision. Fruit and foliage matched in the brilliant pageant; a flame circled over the high tops of the apple trees; they burned together in festival and yielded their garnered wealth and sweetness to Pomona, stealing invisible under the orchard boughs. Upon the hills white stubble of harvest was vanishing under the plough. Red furroughs ascended to the sky-line; roots hid many an acre with lush leaves, grass-green and glaucous; oak and beech scattered their crops; every hedge-row and dingle, river valley and forest dell teemed with treasure of berries, black and blue and scarlet and crimson; of seeds that floated and seeds that fell; of aigrettes and tassels and cups and cones, all brimming with the store and profit of the year. The orchards twinkled with life and resounded to the creak of cart wheels and the shouting of men. Ladders stood against the trees; invisible hands dropped fruit into outspread aprons and lifted baskets.

Apples came in tons to the pulping house, and upon Matthew Fawden fell the important duty of mixing sweet and sharp to determine the qualities of the brew. Mary Lidstone stood in the door of the mill with velvety darkness behind her and the sun shining on her white sunbonnet. About her great heaps of pommace, turning brown, lay scattered on the grass, while poultry pecked the pips from the crushed apple. Fiery hot was this fermenting stuff, but the broken fruit, already piled within for its second crushing, was cool and still half full of cider. In the midst of the pounding house towered the press—a giant structure of oaken beams and massive struts. The central screw shone with steely light, while beneath the head of the press, as upon an altar of sacrifice, the 'mock' was piled in successive layers, firmly packed in cloths woven of horse-hair. At hand the apples were being broken for pounding, and out of a broad, wooden lip, masses of the crushed fruit slithered down from above; while beneath the loft where this operation was performed, a horse plodded round and round in the dark to turn the crushing mill.

"We're 'doubling' now," explained Mrs. Lidstone, for the benefit of Septimus Wedlake, who rested a moment from his labours. "This mock has been through the press once, and we take the first squott along with the second when we double. A squott is a whole press of the mock from the crushing mill, and after the first pressing it has dwindled, so two squotts go to a doubling."

Arthur Partridge and James Woodley were filling the cloths and packing them in the frame that held them. Arthur handled the 'sclum,' or fork, and broke up the sweet mass of fine mock for the second crushing as a man might break ground with a spade. He then scooped it into the horse-hair cloths, where first with his fists and then with a mallet, James beat it hard and firm into the cloths and frame. When the pile had been completed and a square mass of pulp awaited the press, a peg was drawn, a brace of chains unloosed and the huge head of the monster descended by its own weight down the steel core and settled heavily upon the fruit below. It sank with a growl and grumble, and then Mary flooded the 'dish' or floor of the press with cider, and James, with a birch broom, swept all the channels clean. A heavy and thick reek of fruit was in the air; the hot faces of the men shone where four were now assembled.

As the press head settled, juice came rippling from the dish to the granite trough below. The black horse-hair glittered with moisture and beads and bubbles broke out upon it. Then burst forth little spouts and trickles on every side until the oaken dish ran over and a steady, increasing flow of turbid juice fell to the trough, babbling like a brook.

Mrs. Lidstone watched the familiar rite with bright eyes. At the same moment Warner came to the mill. He was working with his men and lending his strength here, there and everywhere. He wore breeches and leggings with a blue collarless shirt, and his sleeves were turned up over immense fore-arms.

Warner had paid his visit to London and a trip intended to last three days extended into ten. For he received a very warm welcome and Harold declared himself the better for his companionship. The fact that Warner and Betsy were now betrothed, made the meeting of no difficulty in the minds of the sick man and his wife.

Warner learned much and experienced strange sensations. He perceived that the attitude of Gilyan to Harold was exceedingly different from his own attitude to Betsy. There existed a wonderful and perfect understanding between the husband and wife. Profound love had doubtless kindled this spirit and Gilyan seemed to know by instinct every thought and wish as it formed in Harold's mind. The visitor felt a sort of reverence for this relationship and pointed it out to Betsy. She had also seen it and it woke in her sorrow rather than surprise. Her grief was for the girl's future; she explained that the wedded pair were one in heart and soul, and that to part from her husband would be a grievous stroke for Gilyan.

Betsy only trusted that he might survive until his child was born during the spring. More than that she believed could hardly be hoped, though there were evidences of temporary improvement and to Warner's eye his cousin seemed not greatly changed. He was better, spent a little time in the shop daily and needed a nurse no more; but he still kept the parlour as his sleeping room. Harold had been allowed some drives and won benefit from them. He was not sanguine concerning himself. Warner spent a good deal of time with him, heard his confidences and promised him to watch over Gilyan in the future and see that she and her child should suffer no privation.

"Thank God you can rise to that generous height," said Harold. "I shall go very easy indeed, if go I must, to know she's got such friends as you and Betsy. It takes a weight off my mind, and I'd sooner think that she was in Betsy's hands, with you to watch over her, than leave her five hundred a year. Unfortunately my show has gone all wrong lately. The bottom's dropped out of it and, instead of being a tower of strength as I expected, Gilyan was not. Far from her fault, but in her innocence she drew a good few customers that I mistrusted. I quarrelled with a few men and forbade 'em the shop and made enemies. I can't stand the sort that talk with double meanings and insult a woman, just because she's at the mercy of the public behind a counter and got to listen. Anyway one enemy makes many sometimes. But that was only a detail. We went down the hill rather sharp for other reasons. It won't matter much. She can get clear of it all and go back to the country with the child."

Warner did various commissions for Harold and gave invaluable proof of friendship. He walked out sometimes with Gilyan and found her voice thrill him as of old. She was weary and full of anxiety; but she was more beautiful than ever in his eyes, and Warner noticed that when he went out with her, men would start and stop at the sight of her face, and look back after her. She did not pretend to be unconscious of this admiration when he drew her attention to it.

"I loved it at first," she said, "but it's old history now and when I look at myself in the glass, I wonder what they see. I've gone off a cruel lot lately. You must while you're bearing a child, and I'll get my looks back again; but I don't want 'em back now. I don't want to go on living if Harold's got to go."

"It's properly wonderful how you understand each other," he said.

"Yes; we were made for each other. It's been a lovely thing having him for a husband—far better than I deserved—and because it was, now I'm going to be punished and wrecked for life, I expect. I don't know what'll happen to me if he dies and I don't care. I don't see how I can go on living, for there'll be nought on earth to keep me alive."

"His child. I'll warrant he thinks a good bit about that."

"I hate children. I don't want the child. The more it was like him, the more it would keep me miserable."

He uttered platitudes and strove to turn her from this melancholy fear.

With Betsy also Warner roamed London and expressed his thankfulness that she did not like urban life, but longed for home again. He bought her a ring and the wedding ring also. They purchased various presents for friends at home and enjoyed long discussions as to the wedding present most fitting for Betsy's father.

Finally they wrote to Mrs. Woodley on the subject and learned from her that, if means permitted, a fine and thick winter over-coat would be the most desirable gift for Mr. Neck.

"She always advises clothes for presents," explained Betsy, "so we'll take the hint and get her something too—a fur wrap for her throat might be very nice."

The time slipped away and Betsy, in the company of Warner, found her recent strange doubts and wonders wane. The very fact that he was frankly solicitous for

Gilyan and made no secret of his desire concerning her welfare pleased Betsy. What had seemed puzzling in a letter was not so when he spoke and repeated, as he often did, his purpose to protect Gilyan if possible against the ill fortune fate had apparently planned. Betsy also found her affection for her cousin in no way abated and assured herself that if, in truth, Warner had developed interest beyond reason in the younger woman, she herself must have felt a reaction and ceased to care for Gilyan and cherish her in the hour of her misfortune. But no shadow clouded her old affection and she felt reassured of Warner's steadfast love. Thus Warner's visit to London proved successful in every way. He stopped until he vowed he could stand bricks and mortar no longer; then he left, taking Betsy with him for a while. Gilyan had made her promise to return for one week more at a later date, and now that time had come and Betsy was back in London again for a week only.

She had written that morning to say Harold seemed not so well, but his affairs were on the way to being wound up and he hoped to leave London for lodgings at Bournemouth in the course of a week or two. Then Betsy would come home for her father's wedding. As for the future of Harold and Gilyan, that would depend upon his health for the next few months.

So it stood; and now, Warner spoke with his mother and presently helped Arthur Partridge and James Woodley.

A lever had been inserted into the press. It was a mighty beam of solid ash and upon it many a name was cut of men who had toiled here through vanished seasons of cider. Old labourers whose mounds in the churchyard showed no commemorating stone were yet recorded here. The beam was forty years old and among the earliest inscriptions upon it stood Warner Lidstone's father.

Septimus Wedlake, during an interval of labour, showed very acute interest in this ancient wood. He could tell stories of not a few there chronicled.

" 'Tis good I carved my own name too," he said; "for who knows what time be granted? And I'd like for generations to come to see that, though my grandfather used Orchard Lands for dark reasons sometimes, my name be down among the righteous workers."

Warner pointed to a name rawly set on the lever.

"Mark Bewes," he said. "I cut that there after he died. As strong as a horse and meant to carve his name himself this year. 'Plenty of time,' he said. But his thread was spun. There was no time."

"Throwing the big elm," answered Mr. Wedlake. "Always was a jolter-head—poor Mark. Nature haven't got no patience with a fool. Thought he was standing clear, but he weren't, and as it fell, a bough got him and broke his back. Nobody's fault but his own."

The chatter broke in upon rhythmic pulses of repeated sounds. There was heard breathing of men tugging at the lever; the musical clink-clink of a catch in the cog-wheel, as the toilers strained on the great beam and crushed down the pommace inch by inch; the lap and chuckle of the cider spurting fitfully from the dish to the trough. At each turn of the screw the river of apple juice ran faster.

Matthew Fawden dipped a horn mug and sipped the cider. His palate was learned and he approved, while the sweating men, with brown mock spattered about them, rested awhile. The cider flow ceased. Then the lever was chained to a windlass and dragged a few cogs farther yet.

The trough had nearly filled and the muddy, red liquid, only paler in tone than the orchard earth, was poured away into small barrels and passed forward, where the cellar-man—old Abel Easterbrook—moved amid his strainers, funnels and rows of casks. He had made cider for fifty years and this was his forty-third vintage at Orchard Lands. He had reached the age of seventy-five, but still enjoyed good health and the vigour necessary to his calling. He was bald and his weak, grey eyes blinked in daylight, for his activities proceeded mostly under candle-lighted gloom.

Abel worked hard at the cider-racking now, and upon each straining the liquor grew more purified, day after day, until it shone clear as transparent amber.

The hive hummed again. Matthew superintended fresh loads of fruit and mixed "Tom Putts" and "Bitter Sweets," "Stubbards" and "Lemons" in the proportions he deemed most fit for the breaker; the crushed mock was turned out, the hair-cloths washed with cider and packed with fresh material. Then Warner and his mother passed from the heavy-scented mill into the freshness and breezes of the orchard.

In Mary's mind was a thought.

"Every woman that weds a Lidstone have got to plant her apple tree, you mind," she said. "Your grandmother's be bearing bravely yet, though getting near the limits. 'Tis all knuckles and gnarls now. And my tree—my 'Ribston'—goes forward to its prime; and Betsy can't do better than a 'Sturmer' pippin, I reckon, for we want more of them good keepers for hoarding."

"No," said Warner firmly. "I've got a dozen 'Sturmers' coming in November and half a hundred others beside that you marked in the catalogue; but Lidstone women always plant a 'Ribston,' mother, and Betsy will put her tree in sight of yours, and yours will set it a good example."

He laughed mightily at his simple jest; and it was the last time that he did laugh for many a long and melancholy month.

Their talk turned to Betsy and Mrs. Lidstone held that she should be home again. Then came the twinkle of a red bicycle through the orchard trees, where an adventurous telegraph boy was steering his machine among the pools and piles of fruit.

"That'll be from Messrs. Whiteridge about their price for my cider," said Mrs. Lidstone; but she was mistaken. The telegram came from London.

It was directed to Warner and he opened it and read, while his mother spoke to the boy and bade him fill his pockets from a tree near at hand. The reader's eyes grew round and his jaw fell. He stared before him and drew a great breath then, without speaking, he handed the evil news to his mother.

"Harold passed away suddenly. Gilyan very ill. Can Mrs. Lidstone come to me? Break news to Mrs. Purchase. Am writing, Betsy."

The man trembled, his eyes on his mother as she read. He knew that she had faced many a crisis in her life and there was none better able to act swiftly and wisely when the demand came.

She turned to the telegraph boy first and asked him for a form. Then she wrote Betsy's direction and the words, *"Coming this afternoon. Mary."*

When the boy was gone his mother spoke to Warner.

"It'll be about half after eleven now and I'll make ready. Look into the time-table. There's a train somewhere round two o'clock or later. That'll fetch me up by evening. Us will want a man up there I expect. You can drive me to Paignton presently and see Paul Neck on the way back, and then go down and break it to Jennifer Purchase, or ask Lucy to do it."

"This will be terrible hard for Gilyan " he said.

"She was ready for the worst."

"But Betsy says 'very ill.' That means danger for her."

As they returned to the house Warner declared a great fear.

"I'm terrible troubled, because she says Harold went very sudden. I'll tell you something I never told Betsy, nor Gilyan. Harold asked me to buy him a revolver one day. There'd been a good few burglaries round about his house—so he said—and sleeping down on the ground floor, he felt he'd like a weapon handy."

"That was natural in his weak state. Sick folk are frightened of nothing."

"Maybe; but I bought it, and he put it in a desk where he kept his papers, and told me expressly not to mention the thing to Gilyan, nor yet Betsy. I forgot all about it till the day before I was leaving him, and then, alone with me, he said he wasn't going to live a dog's life dragged over years and years, and that if the doctors didn't find a hopeful turn soon after he went to Bournemouth, he should end it. And now I'm terrible feared he may——"

"Put it out of your mind," said Mary. "I'll write tonight. Cases like that go off sudden sometimes."

"But why should Gilyan be very ill if it was all natural?"

"Because natural things are often sudden, and though natural and expected, the shock must have been very great for her all the same. She always hoped he would mend."

"Could you telegraph tonight?"

"I will do so," she promised. Then they reached the house.

Mrs. Lidstone left by the afternoon train for London and, after seeing her depart, her son called at 'Church House' in Upper Marldon. During the evening Warner went with Lucy to see Mrs. Purchase. The old woman was terribly prostrated by the news, but thankful to know that Mrs. Lidstone had already gone to her grand-daughter.

Between eight and nine there came a telegram.

"Good hope for Gilyan."

That night Warner did not close his eyes and after lying in bed for two hours, rose again, donned his garments for the journey on the morrow, and packed a kit-bag in readiness. He determined to wait only for the noon post and then, if he did not hear to the contrary, he would follow his mother.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RETURN

THE night was long for Warner Lidstone and at dawn he rose, descended to the house-place, lighted the kitchen fire and made himself some tea. Before breakfast he set out to meet the postman, and with an expected letter, his suspense in a measure ended. He learned the worst.

From Betsy it came, not his mother, and she had concealed nothing. Warner's monition was realized. Harold had driven to see his own doctor, and accompanied him to a specialist for a fresh examination and opinion. He had then returned home, saying that all was going on well, and by his cheerfulness he had deceived Gilyan and Betsy into renewed hope. On the following morning he had despatched his wife about some commission in connection with his business, and had asked Betsy to take the shop for ten minutes while he wrote a letter. She had not left him above a quarter of an hour when she heard an explosion in the little parlour behind the shop and hastened in to find that Lidstone had destroyed himself. A letter directed to his wife lay on the table, and having written it, he had shot himself through the head.

Five minutes afterwards Gilyan returned and fainted on hearing of her husband's death. There followed details of Betsy's subsequent actions.

The letter left for his widow told how Harold had heard that at most only a few months were left for him to live. He had then determined that Gilyan should be spared the ordeal of those months and himself the misery of them. But in so far as his wife was concerned the dead man had frustrated his own object, for Gilyan under this sudden convulsion of grief and horror suffered a miscarriage and was now very ill. Betsy concluded with a note of thankfulness that Mrs. Lidstone had replied so promptly to her telegram, but she had despatched her letter to catch the country post, before Mary could arrive. Warner's betrothed evidently wrote under great stress of emotion. There was a postscript to the effect that the coroner's inquest would be held in two days' time.

The man took breakfast with his sister and spoke much of Gilyan while his food remained untasted. He was deeply perturbed and proposed starting for London by the morning train. He directed that Lucy should see Mrs. Purchase and acquaint her with all particulars.

"She'll be thankful to God there's going to be no baby," said Lucy. "And no doubt that's one bright thing about it—Gilyan's luck again."

"Don't talk rubbish, and break it to Mrs. Purchase so gently as you know how," he answered. "She'll have to hear the truth, and it's useless trying to hide up that Harold killed himself. Somebody's sure to see it in the newspapers."

But Lucy took a less conventional view of the dead man's act.

"You jump on me because I'm sensible, and I'll be more sensible yet," she retorted. "Why hide up the best and bravest thing the man ever did? I never liked him after what he did to you; but I forgave that long ago, because it was a blessing in disguise for you, as we know now; but I will say that to spare his wife those months of misery—that was a fine thing; and no doubt all the reward he'll get for that is to be brought in a suicide while of insane mind."

He told Lucy about the revolver and she made a curious comment.

"I'm glad you weren't witty enough to know what was hid in his mind," she said. "If you had known, you wouldn't have pleasured him."

"I should think not! What decent man would help a suicide?"

"Any decent man well might if he was large-minded enough," she answered. "You can have justifiable homicide; then why not justifiable suicide?"

But a gulf divided sister and brother. Warner's mind had never ventured from the safe paths of thought wherein moved the majority.

He set off for London and Lucy went to see Mrs. Purchase.

The old woman seemed to be stricken with idleness by her anxiety. She had been crying the painful tears of the aged and sat now quite still in her kitchen with her hands in her lap—waiting.

"Have you had any breakfast, Mrs. Purchase?" asked Lucy, and Jennifer shook her head.

"Don't want to eat till I know if——"

"You must eat and drink too. I'll make some tea. Now you've got to be brave and listen. Sad things have happened, Jennifer, and it's no good pretending they are not fearfully sad. Gilyan is holding her own. Her child was born dead."

"Is that true, Lucy?"

"Yes, it's in Betsy's letter this morning."

"Thank God then. That's one bright side to this coil."

Jennifer was silent for a moment, then spoke again. Though thankful to learn of her grand-daughter's disappointment, she dwelt on her own melancholy experience of the past and derived a dreadful conclusion from the event.

"Death has always been about the only happiness that ever did offer for any of mine. But there's something parlous wrong with the world when the living envy them that are dead and are glad for a stillbirth—something parlous wrong."

"Don't you talk like that. I feel very sure indeed that Gilyan is going to make a good recovery. We shall soon hear that, I expect. Come to the fire and warm yourself. Your hands be cold. Now I'll make you a piece of toast. Will you take an egg to your breakfast?"

But Mrs. Purchase made no answer to these questions. She looked at Lucy impersonally, her thoughts elsewhere.

"Life's crowding in upon me. I hoped that in my old age there would come a bit of peace and that I'd have a few years without fret. When all you've got lie in the grave except yourself, then, by comparison with such a life as mine, you find peace. But something's wrong—something's wrong if only the grave can give you peace. Something's wrong if the best you've got to hope for the children you have born and the father who got them is death."

Lucy had found an egg in the larder and she was now preparing a meal.

"I'm going to drink a cup with you," she said. "I'm thirsty. Warner's gone off to lend them a hand and I'll write any letter you want writing if it will save you trouble."

But Jennifer continued buried in her own thoughts.

"I've often asked myself why my faults should have been punished so terrible sharp. To see all die and be left alive myself. And what did I do to deserve it? I was a bit gay as a young woman. I went a little far now and again. But what a price! If I could have known, I'd have called on Heaven to strike me dead once for all when I was three-and-twenty. I'd rather have gone out of it then. A little quiet, well-meaning wretch like me, that never wished harm to a worm—there's something wrong—it ain't fair. Think how many of the great sinners get away with it and not a word whispered against 'em, and white marble crosses built up on top of 'em when they die."

"Listen," interrupted Lucy. "I want you to draw up to the table and listen to me. You haven't heard all yet. Harold Lidstone killed himself, Jennifer. And it was a good, brave thing to do; but he didn't count the cost for Gilyan. He meant well, but the shock did for the baby."

Mrs. Purchase took this in slowly.

"Killed himself? Are you sure of that? Shortened his own life?"

"Yes,—for Gilyan's sake. The doctors had doomed him and he knew he had to go, so, being a lot braver than we thought, he did go—for Gilyan's sake. But loving him like she did, and not knowing he was bound to die pretty soon, but hoping to the end he might live, when she came home and found he was gone, the blow upset her. But mother's with her and Warner's gone up this morning. We shall get good news of her presently."

"What's good news? Can the luck change now? Won't nobody understand?"

Lucy poured out some hot tea and peeled the crown of Jennifer's egg.

"Now eat and drink, my old dear," she said. "I understand for one. We shall soon see a way when all the sad details are over. I dare say in a week or two you'll have poor Gilyan back."

"I dare say I shall. 'Cheat-the-Boys' they call her in these parts. Now a boy's cheated her, for no doubt she was going to have a man-child. They consumptives always get men children. And if she comes back penniless, Christ knows how I'm going to keep her. Things have got a lot harder since she married."

"Don't you think twice about that," urged Lucy. "You have plenty of good, faithful friends, Jennifer."

"I'll accept no charity, and no real friend would dare to offer it. I'll carry on for her while I can."

The old woman's eye brightened suddenly at a thought.

She stared through Lucy and a sort of renewed vitality informed her drooping shape. She sat up, her mind moved, her forehead worked. But she did not utter her reflection.

"There's a lot of life in you yet and lots of life in Withy Lease," said Lucy. "Mark was telling to Matthew only three nights agone and he says the willows are amazing."

But Jennifer paid no heed.

"What one have done another can do," she said, but not to her companion. "Not that it's a new thought. I've —I've—played with it afore."

"Drink your tea and let down your egg—there's a dear. I must be getting on, because with mother and brother both away, there's a lot up to me. We've got a good few extra hands with us, old Septimus Wedlake among 'em. He's a cure, and Matt hates him; but I like him. He's different from most of them."

Mrs. Purchase seemed to waken as the girl rose to depart. She thanked Lucy for her visit.

"There's always the next world, remember," she said.

"Yes, Jennifer; of course there is—the wonderful next world we hear about."

"Well may it be wonderful," answered Mrs. Purchase. "If the next world makes up to me for half what I've suffered in this one, it'll need to be wonderful with a vengeance. We know that with God all things are possible, Lucy, else I shouldn't believe I could ever get justice."

"Yes, you will, Jennifer—so will everybody—justice for the good ones and mercy for the other sort."

Lucy went on her way and late that night she sent Arthur Partridge with a message to Withy Lease. A telegram had arrived stating that Gilyan was a little better.

Within a week Warner returned, but by that time his cousin's widow stood out of danger. The dead reposed in his grave and Mrs. Lidstone, with Betsy and her son, attended his funeral. A verdict of 'suicide' had been given by the coroner's jury. They did not pretend that Harold was insane.

Warner went back again to London a little later, to do much necessary work and wind up Gilyan's business. A lawyer helped him and considered that those interested were fortunate to find the assets sufficient to pay the debts. When all was done, Gilyan found herself with barely enough to clear the duties and costs of the funeral. But no body of debt faced her, as Warner had feared might be the case. Her husband's death had saved expense, as he intended that it should.

When next he returned, Warner brought Betsy with him, for her father's marriage was now within sight and many duties called her home. She came back worn and weary; nor did her native air serve quickly to restore her. Lucy found that some deep change, not to be defined or explained, had affected her. She was depressed, which the other held to be natural after her experiences; but there seemed an indifference to herself and her own great, new interests that puzzled her friends. Betsy spoke of Gilyan and of the coming marriage of her father; but she did not mention Warner beyond declaring how useful he had been and how well he had wrought to save the dead man's estate every penny possible. Of herself Betsy would not speak and stopped Lucy when she attempted to do so. She visited Jennifer and spent a day with her, that she might give her all details and comfort her.

Lucy observed that Warner and Betsy were not much together at this season; but that was explained since each continued busy about personal affairs. Mr. Neck's wedding was near and the cider-making not yet out of hand. It had been the heaviest brew for twenty years, so declared Matthew Fawden.

A week before the wedding, Mary Lidstone returned with Gilyan. The widow was now strong enough to travel.

Warner went as far as Exeter to meet them, and at last they drove into Lower Marldon, on a stormy, autumn day when the elms swayed overhead and flung their thinning gold on the storm wind of the equinox. Then, Mrs. Lidstone and her box being left at Orchard Lands, Gilyan, Lucy and Warner proceeded to Withy Lease.

There they quickly left her, and until a late hour that night, when the rest of the household already slept, Lucy set on the side of her mother's bed and heard all that Mary had to tell. The younger noticed a spirit of unrest in Mrs. Lidstone. She was very thankful to return, but beyond a fitful cheerfulness at the prosperity of all things at home, an air of distraction and depression hung heavy upon her. She was not herself, it seemed to her daughter and, despite the evident relief at leaving London, appeared to be weighed down by private thoughts—a state of mind very unusual in her. Indeed Lucy recollected no parallel. Whether her mother's disquiet related to the past or future, the girl could not be sure, but from experience she knew that Mary never allowed herself to trouble about the past at any time. Something induced Lucy to suspect that the matter of her mother's thoughts might be concerned with Gilyan. Indeed that appeared obvious enough, since there was nothing else now to awaken any uneasiness. She therefore hazarded a speech as she rose to leave the elder and let her sleep.

"I mustn't keep you talking no more, mother," she said. "I hope the wind won't keep you awake. 'Tis the first autumn storm and it's huffling in your chimney like winter."

"I love to hear it," answered Mary. "It will blow mind and body clean again."

"And build up Gilyan too. Nothing like your home air. She's terrible thin and wisht looking, but she'll be lovelier than ever in six weeks. I reckon she'll be very like to marry again before a year's out. Not built to mourn over-long—eh, mother?''

Mary nodded but was silent, with her weary eyes on her daughter.

Lucy kissed her.

''What are you thinking, I wonder? You've come home full of thoughts, and that look you've got sometimes, when you've seeing things that haven't happened.''

''I've seen things that have happened,'' answered Mrs. Lidstone. ''Did Warner have much to say about Gilyan when he came home last time?''

''She was never off his lips an hour.''

''I suppose not. My eyes are shutting, child. Dout the candle, will 'e?''

CHAPTER XXV

THE REED-ROND

"YES," declared Mr. Neck, "it may be a strange thing to your ear, but we've ordained to go for our honeymoon to Cardiff."

"What a place to choose," said Lucy, who had come to visit Paul's daughter at the 'Church House.'

"Honeymoons depend upon the honeymooners," he explained. "There's honeymoons, my dear, would be a success in hell, and others a failure even if they were took in the good place. We go to Cardiff, because the only relation I care about lives there, and he's old and I'm wishful to look him up. Fear nothing. Cardiff won't mar our little holiday, I assure you."

A fine day smiled upon Mr. Neck's nuptials and large numbers assembled to see the ceremony, while a smaller party enjoyed the bridegroom's hospitality afterwards. Mrs. Woodley wore a plum-coloured gown with decorations of black fur. She was calm and stately; she filled not only James, her son, with admiration, but many others also. Matthew Fawden attended the handsome meal that followed the wedding; but Mark did not, because those for whom he worked were in mourning. The Lidstones, however, could not choose but go.

"You'll be up here for another wedding afore long, ma'am," said Mr. Wedlake to Mary. "And you mustn't take it hard if they name me, in time to come, as a sort of relation by marriage to you. It sounds a rash thought; but you can see how it works. First there's my old friend, Paul,—he takes Sarah Woodley; then Paul's fine daughter, Betsy, weds your son; and then my daughter, Melinda, takes Sarah's son."

"The question is, when are you going to wed Jane Baker?" asked Mrs. Lidstone. "Nobody's going to be very wishful to have you for a relation till you clear your conscience, Septimus."

"In these cases the husband's the tyrant, and Andrew Baker can keep us bound in the chains of the devil so long as he's a mind to," explained Mr. Wedlake. "But as for conscience, ma'am, my conscience be so light as a bird on the wing; and so is Mrs. Baker's. For why? Because we know that God reads the heart; and if you was to ask the Almighty about the position, what would He say? He'd say, ' 'Tis Andy Baker be living in sin, not my servant Septimus, nor yet the woman.' Baker must move for the divorcement, you see, not us; and the longer he delays, the worse for him when justice comes to be done. If you're inclined to feel shocked or sorry for anybody, you fret for Andrew, my dear."

They talked on the way back from church to the wedding breakfast; and elsewhere Betsy walked with Warner, and James beside Melinda. Warner was begging Betsy to pleasure him presently when her father and step-mother had set out.

"I saw a glimpse of Gilyan yesterday," he said, "and I told her that very like you and me would stroll down to the Lease, when all was over, and see her, and come in for a cup of tea with her grandmother. D'you feel like it? She's a bit troubled over Mrs. Purchase. Gilyan's getting stronger every day and looks it; but old Jennifer's difficult and taking on a lot about the perils of the coming winter. She's such a proud old fool you can't help her; but what's the sense of always pleading your poverty and worrying people with it, if you ain't going to put your pride in your pocket and let them as can help you do so?"

"It's a sort of satisfaction to her to tell over her misfortunes," explained Betsy. "I went down there on Sunday to see Gilyan, and her poor grandmother was one long lamentation. You'd almost think she liked it. 'You've got Gilyan safe and sound and the world before her,' I said to Mrs. Purchase, and she answered, 'The cruel thing is not that I've got Gilyan, but that Gilyan have got me. I'm cumbering the earth,' she said, 'and did ought to be under it for her peace, as well as other people's peace.' I told her not to think of such wicked things. I doubt she's getting weak-minded. She's had a cruel lot of trouble."

"Will you come down presently? We'll get a nice walk by the reed-rond."

"I'll come of course, when it's all over here," she promised.

A pair of grey horses conveyed Mr. and Mrs. Neck to the railway station. A livery stable keeper at Paignton insisted upon sending them as his contribution to the entertainment, though Paul held such an equipage old-fashioned at this date. But Sarah approved. Mr. Wedlake fastened an old shoe to the rear of the vehicle and a considerable company assembled to cheer the start.

Half an hour later, Warner and his future wife set off. They walked down the hill with Mrs. Lidstone and Lucy, then left them for the valley and stream side. Warner was sympathetic and hoped that Betsy did not regret her father's marriage. He spoke mechanically with his mind elsewhere, for the subject had long been exhausted between them and he knew that Betsy esteemed her father's second wife and was indeed very fond of her. The girl understood where his thoughts were occupied and spoke accordingly.

"Gilyan told me you'd offered to square up the bit that is still owing in London," she said.

"I meant to have asked you first," he answered, "but

I knew what you'd feel about it. All mine is yours, Betsy—you understand that. And we're of one mind there. She must be free every way to begin her life over again. The debt is well under three figures, all told."

"I'm very glad you should do it, Warner. But don't tell her grandmother. It will be another grievance and she'll want to pay you back."

"So Gilyan said. Jennifer only understands that her grand-daughter owes nobody anything. Now, of course, she's crying out that it's a cruel thing the baby died; and if it had lived, then that would have been the cruel thing. The Lease is no home for a young creature that's suffered all Gilyan has. I'd like to get her away from it."

Betsy nodded.

"We shall see how things go with her presently," she answered. "The spring may bring forth something."

"We must watch over her—you and me," he answered.

Above the reed-rond there waved fading purple plumes of arundo, touched with silver as the wind stroked them. Mark was busy here and stayed from his harvesting at sight of them. He pulled in his punt, for the reed grew from two feet of water, and came ashore.

"Just seen a baggering great otter and be going to teel a trap for him," he said. "If the hounds had only visited us this summer, they might have had a bit of sport, but they never offer to come. How did it go off, Miss Neck? A brave day for 'em."

"All went well, Mark; and father wished you'd been there, but he understood why you weren't."

"Yes, he'd understand. The family's in black, you see, and when they go black, we old-fashioned servants go black likewise, if you follow me. Not but what as a thinking man I believe it was all for the best; of course it was all for the best, because it happened; but I mean that even we mortal worms with our dim eyes can see it was all for the best. For if he'd been spared a few years, she'd have been left a pauper and a widow, with a child or two hanging on to her and her beauty marred. Now, as I tell Mrs. Purchase, there's no harm done, for Gilyan have won a lot of wisdom and haven't had to pay for it with much time wasted, or good looks lost. She's worth twice what she was a year ago in my opinion. For she's steadied down; she knows the meaning of life and trouble; and as to her outside, she'll be as fresh as a rose in six months and in the open market again.''

''You're always so hopeful, Mark,'' said Betsy.

''Along with anybody else, my great gift of hope might have shone,'' he admitted, ''but, as often happens, just the thing a person shines best at be lost by force of circumstances and the lot to which they are called. Hope to Mrs. Purchase is a cheese-cake to a pig—thrown away. She's got no use for it—it turns her stomach; so I lift up my heart all alone.''

''Matt ought to have been her man and you ought to have been ours, Mark,'' declared Warner; but the other shook his head.

''Matthew would have played on her weakness and made her worse. If they'd been called to live together, they'd have cast one another down till they soon hated the sight of each other.''

They left him and wandered together along a bank, beneath which the shining surface of open water was painted with the reflections of earth and sky. Imposed upon it also floated drift of dying weed and falling leaf. Here the mirror was broken by a sudden glitter of colourless light, where a shoal of dace simultaneously warped together, frightened by the vibration of feet on the bank. Then the water settled again. Moor-hens, dab-chicks and coots swam at the edge of the reed-beds. On the bank a big rabbit lay asleep, with the white fur of his belly bright in the sunset light. He leapt up and was gone. The dragon-flies that haunted the rond were growing few, but here and there one still hawked and its rustling pinions flashed beside them. Brown scum, glaucous sedge and reed-mace were no longer gemmed by the red and green 'devil's darning needles,' for their time had passed. Water-voles made a ripple here and there, and they saw a wet-furred, bright-eyed thing humped up on a grass tuft, nibbling a juicy stem.

The flowers were nearly gone and the silver and jade foliage of willow and osier had first turned into lemon light, then flung down their mantles on the water. Here and there a leaf still fluttered like a flake of fire upon the bough; and from a wild cherry that towered above, fell the last scarlet leaves.

Upon the path lay a silver glimmer of broken shells, whose inner walls shone with mother-of-pearl. They were the homes of fresh-water mussels that some creature had devoured.

Then a dark figure, very slim in her black gown, blotted the mellow colours of the path and Gilyan came to them.

"What a little slip of a thing she looks," said Warner.

"But she's walking lighter—more like what she used to walk already," answered his sweetheart.

When Gilyan reached them, Betsy kissed her, while Warner shook hands. She had already won some physical strength from the return home, but she was very subdued and her old vivacity had vanished. She walked beside them, having first made them promise not to go away until they had drunk tea with her grandmother.

"I told her you would, and all she said was that Withy Lease was no place for happy people. I'm beginning to doubt about grandmother's wits, Betsy. There's one thing: striving so hard to lift her up helps to make me forget my own troubles."

"We've come to tea," said the other girl. "We'll tell Jennifer about my father's wedding and try to make her forget for a bit."

"How d'you find yourself?" asked Warner. "You begin to get a thought of colour in your face to my eye."

"I'm all right. I suppose I oughtn't to feel better and hungrier every day. I dare say some people would say it was faithless to Harold. But truth's truth. I'm not happy, of course, and never shall be again in this world; but I'm getting so strong as a pony."

"And you'll soon be strong enough to tackle Mrs. Purchase," declared Betsy. "She's wilful, Gilyan, and she broods and has got into a way of thinking that she's a sort of Jonah and must bring bad luck to all who know her. You must shake her out of that, else it will do her mind a lot of harm."

"It's age," answered the widow. "I see a change in her. But I'm doing what I can to make her feel life's worth living still for her, if not for me. I thought she'd be so full of sorrow for me; but it's all for herself. That's rather funny in a way."

They walked forward under a little copse, and a wood pigeon uttered his monotone above them. Gilyan held up her hand and they stopped to listen.

"I like to hear the wood doves now—for a strange reason," she told them. "I come out sometimes alone just to listen, because it puts me in mind of the voice of an old priest, who used to give me Communion in church."

"You went now and again, I remember," said Warner.

"I did—often of a morning. Not for myself, but to pray for Harold, when there was still doubt how it would go. He got religious at the end—while he still hoped. He couldn't go himself, but he liked me to go to the Communion and pray for him. And the old priest crooned just like that bird."

"You'll never want to go back to a town, I expect," said Betsy.

"Never—never. I'll live in the green country for the rest of my life. I must have it in my eyes now, and the peace of it. London will never see me again—never. I'll look back at it as just a cruel memory. And yet my great sorrow will be forever mixed up with my great joy, you know. I've had my share of happiness, and more than I deserved. I know that."

"It's the peace of the old home you want," declared Warner. "It will grow upon you and do good things to you in time, Gilyan."

She nodded.

"You two are all I've got in the world now," she said. "I can put it like that, because you and Betsy are one, or soon will be. You two and your mother, Warner—that's all that's left—and nobody can say I'm out of luck to have such friends."

"There's plenty more than us waiting to be your friends when the time comes," promised Betsy. "You can very well afford to wait till the past grows a thought dim. When you can look back loving without aching—that's the time to hope for. And you'll come to it."

"Never, Betsy. I shall always ache. He was so good. Only I know the best part of him—that generous—too generous of course; but he never knew his thread was going to be cut, else he'd have kept his money in his pocket. I'd have made him do so for his own sake. But he never spent on himself. Did you think to notice that? Never a penny, unless I made him buy a new pair of boots, or something. It didn't seem to enter his mind to buy himself anything latterly. He wanted to send grandmother fifty pounds, when 'Frog' wrote to me on the quiet to say she was terrible hard up; but I wouldn't let him, because well I knew it was no time to do it. And you're such another," Gilyan added, suddenly looking up at Warner.

"Not I," he said. "I'm only putting you clear. That's nothing. Betsy's very well pleased I should."

"Of course I am. Ain't you my best girl friend and always was, Gilyan?"

"You're a wonder, and nobody ever understood me so well, or forgave me so much as you," answered Gilyan. "But I shan't forget. Don't neither of you people think I shall ever forget what you've been to me. I'll pay you back some day—not all—that's beyond my power—but a bit. I'll try and pay you back if ever I get the chance to do it."

The sun was gone and mist began to rise over the water-meadows before they reached the homestead. There tea awaited them, and Mark Fawden was already eating and drinking when they arrived. Now Betsy and Warner told of the wedding and Jennifer listened. They stopped an hour and then went their way to Orchard Lands.

Even when alone a spectator had noticed that they seldom spoke of their own close interests and coming union. It seemed as though, by some implicit understanding, that subject was omitted from their conversation as the thing least vital to them both.

Betsy, indeed, in secret, waited and hoped for him to speak of themselves; but she was perhaps too proud, perhaps too doubtful to become personal. She longed for the intimate on Warner's lips, but it delayed.

They spoke only of Gilyan as they went to join his mother, and she listened patiently, answered hopefully, declared that a time must swiftly come when the widow of Harold Lidstone would know happiness again.

"I felt it a lot when she said we two were so much to her," murmured Warner. "But that's not me, Betsy, it's you. I only come in as part of you. 'Twill be in our power, please God, to do a lot for her. She's had to go through a bitter pass. You've always been such a true friend to her; and I feel nothing but kindness to her too. Where I stand now—your husband to be—I can look at poor Gilyan and even feel so kindly as an elder brother might. And so I think she feels to me."

Betsy remained silent, and he ran on, full of such interest in the theme of Gilyan's future that he failed to observe his future wife had ceased to take part in his conversation, but was only listening to it.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SHADOW

GILYAN LIDSTONE was far too full of vitality and too avid of life to succumb. Her voice spoke of eternal widowhood and twilight days sacred to memory; and her voice belied her while she uttered the words. It was still informed with the throb and little catch that charmed, like the unconscious music of a bird. She swiftly regained strength and her beauty had never been impaired. But her experience had left permanent impress upon her character. She lost forever the volatile and childlike power to flit from pleasure to pleasure, as a butterfly from flower to flower. There had come a gravity into her eyes that departed no more. Her mind matured and, as a first result of this painful ripening, she found herself less self-centred and less wilfully bent upon her own interests. A larger sympathy henceforth informed her. She had loved her husband as much as it was possible; but love's great river cannot be both deep and wide. Yet she had risen far above what might have been predicted for her, and proved, for one so young and inexperienced, a steadfast nurse and a patient and valiant help-mate. All that was finest and bravest in her had responded to the hapless Harold. She had surprised even Betsy, who always held her to possess finer qualities than other people granted her. And the very distinction, good sense and courage of Gilyan were among the manifestations, in London, that had given Betsy pause and added to her own disquiet. Why, the elder girl could not explain to herself, yet it was so; and she knew that Warner had likewise marked these things.

Harold Lidstone's widow devoted herself to Jennifer now, but found the old woman so far removed in thought from herself, that she failed to make any impression, or lessen her grandmother's tribulations. Therefore, she turned upon herself, went for long and solitary walks, wondered sometimes why the people made no effort to break in upon her life and distract her sorrow. In truth her own rebound to health and vigour was so swift that none guessed at it; and while well-wishers waited till months should pass, Gilyan had digested her misfortunes in the vigour of physical health and retained only the valued memory of her dead husband. It was inevitable that such recollections should lose their poignancy with time, and become, perhaps, the more precious as she was able to dwell on them without pain. She had never been overwhelmed, only dazed and bewildered; and the lesser tragedy of her child's untimely end was regarded by her as good fortune rather than bad. She did not pretend otherwise.

"Better to remember Harold as he was, when I fell in love with him," she said to Betsy. "I don't want to keep his illness before me—only our love time and his grand, plucky end. Our child would have been a pinnickin, poor thing, with no nature in it; and the more like him, the more a thorn in my side."

Her very health made her rational—as good health will. There was no superstition in her. She had developed another quality strange in most women of her age. A great reticence marked her; but while she dwelt outwardly on the surface of things and revealed a new interest and compassion for the joys and sorrows of other people, her own thoughts she reserved: there was only one man and one woman who ever heard her speak about herself.

To Betsy and Warner she turned, and especially the latter. It was among her most consoling and bright memories to recollect Warner with her husband—his last willing services and gentle attentions. The stalwart country-man and his sickly and sinking cousin were a picture that cheered Gilyan in some way. She always remembered how Harold had reserved almost his last enthusiasm and gratitude for Warner. She had not forgotten something else also—words that Harold had spoken not twenty-four hours before he took his life. He had lamented that Warner had not waited a little longer.

"If eyes can speak," he said, "the man loves you still. I should like to have given you to him before I went, Gilyan."

And she had answered that no man on earth would ever come between her and the memory of her husband and the father of her child. But now the recollection of his words came sometimes unbidden. She had been impressed with the fidelity of Warner and the thousand unconscious acts and thoughts he had revealed for her after her husband's death. He still seemed a shadow beside the memory of Harold, but she realised how much she owed him; she was glad and thankful that he could still remain her friend.

"And well Betsy deserves him," she often told herself. Repeatedly she said it, for the thought of Betsy and Warner's marriage came second only to that of her own immediate past. There was happiness in the spectacle of their happiness. She was not constituted to shut herself behind any bars of personal tribulation. While there was life, her unconquerable joy of life was bound to break all opposition; and since she could not yet feel any throb of personal, returning joy, life for her took that shape of interest in others. She picked up the old threads and renewed old acquaintance and friendships. Two men wrote from London offering to wed her: one man—the prosperous wine merchant—came to see her and offer himself and his fortune. But all that belonged to London, save Harold himself, swiftly receded into the depths of her mind. These people were already dim and unreal. They had sunk out of sight and beyond reach of emotion. They would only rise again to the surface when she was an old woman and, on the shores of death, find the curtains of vanished years lifting one behind the other. No men had ever attracted her save Warner and Harold, and no man had ever made her love him except her husband. Life had deepened her character and enlarged her understanding; but presently it did something else and taught her that without more love, life would be impossible. No grave but her own would ever bury Gilyan's power of loving. She hid the discovery from herself for a season: it seemed a betrayal of the dead; but in process of time, first with a sort of secret and startled shame, then with growing indifference, she faced the fact that the past had not written the last chapter of her sexual life. At first she did not reflect upon Warner Lidstone; then she found herself doing so. She told herself that the circumstances made it safe to do so; and granting that, she amused herself by speculating as to whether, in time to come, she could have turned to him again with deeper emotions and wedded him, if he had wanted her. The idea was awakened, as much by Warner's active solicitude on her account, as by the fresh light his generosity and loyal service had thrown upon his character. Her gratitude for these things persisted also. His ceaseless thoughts for her comfort and his kindly plans, as well as all that he had done in the past, served naturally to alter Gilyan's attitude towards him; and she came gradually to know and feel that she could now have regarded him in the light of a husband with a trust and content, widely removed from the passion she had entertained for his cousin, but not barren of love. His physical strength attracted her and his slow, but steady mind. He was the antithesis of Harold, and not the least attraction about him lay in the fact that he would never have reminded Gilyan of her husband, in action, or speech, or view of life.

She toyed with the idea, being tempted to do so by Warner's obvious deep interest and fervent friendship, while absolved from any question of propriety by the fact that he was betrothed to her own dearest friend. From practical propositions at this stage of her bereavement she would have fled; but there could be no reality in thoughts of Warner as a husband; and for that reason she entertained herself by examining them. It passed time, which hung heavily upon her.

Warner came occasionally to Withy Lease. He had offended Mrs. Purchase by offering her money, to tide the osier farm over an unfortunate season. Then came an evening when the apple-grower walked with Gilyan in November twilight and she told him that her grandmother had not forgiven him.

"Poor gran's the sort that—but what's the use of talking? We've got to suffer her. There's often none so sharp to feel a hurt as them who be quickest to give a hurt, Warner. A very curious thing, but I've seen it a lot of times. Gran' will tread on anybody's toes without caring a cuss who she makes squeak; but if anybody treads on her toes, she never can forgive them."

"She's morbid and don't see quite straight now-a-days," he explained. "The old either get easy-going and content to be left alone in peace and comfort, or else they'll grow terrible touchy and busy. And that sort be parlous difficult to manage. Mrs. Purchase must be busy; but the devil with her is that she won't let them as can, be busy for her. My mother's worrying a lot about her; and what we want to find is a way to do her good and ease her mind about money without appearing in the matter. But she's very sharp, and if she thought we were up to anything like that, she'd never forgive us."

"And meanwhile she properly glories in being so hard up and driven. 'Here's another crown of thorns, Gilyan!' she'll say of a morning before any bit of bad news. And from her voice, if you didn't hear the words, you might think somebody had left her a legacy. But she can't bear up against fate much longer. Something's got to go pretty soon. And it will have to be me. I must get away and earn a bit."

"It's her mind that will go," answered the man. "Leave her and list to me. I've got a grievance, too, now-a-days—not against you, but against Betsy."

"If you have, I won't hear it then," said Gilyan. "But I doubt you're laughing. When did anybody on earth have a grievance against her—least of all him that's going to marry her?"

"That's it—that's the grievance! She won't name the day, and the year running out and everything. Puts it off and off. And a joke's a joke; but the time has come, in my opinion. I want to be married and settled, Gilyan, so fast as ever I can be. And Betsy knows it."

Gilyan considered.

"It isn't for want of love," she said. "She worships the ground you walk on, as well she may do. I'll ask her about it, if you like. You may feel pretty sure she's got a reason, even if she won't tell you what it is. She never does anything without a reason, and if she's crossing your will, there must be some very strong cause for it."

"Sound her," suggested Warner. "It is just because I feel there must be a reason that I bother. You see her step-mother's back now, and this is the right and proper time for Betsy to leave her old home and come to me; and yet she won't even give an outside limit."

"Your James Woodley's going to be married next week," said Gilyan, "and the send-off is from 'Church House,' and I'm going up—not to the party—but to give Betsy a hand. And I'll see if I can put in a word, Warner. I don't say that I'll dare, but if the chance comes I will. Have you thought to ask Uncle Paul about it?"

"I have, but I don't like to. I don't want anybody to think I'm silly on the subject, nor yet to suppose there's any real difference between Betsy and me. A man's got his pride, and if a woman who loves him well enough to marry him, don't love him well enough to pleasure him about the date, he can only keep his thoughts to himself and wait her will."

"It's not like Betsy," ventured Gilyan.

"It is not; and yet I've made a pretty good favour of it. I want to be married and settled for many reasons."

She promised to do what she could, though she warned him that, when the time actually came, she might be frightened to touch on such a delicate matter. And while they talked, and presently parted under the diffused light of a cloud-hidden moon, elsewhere, at his home, Betsy had descended unexpectedly to see James Woodley with a message from his mother. It happened that when she arrived, Lucy was out and Mrs. Lidstone took the opportunity for speech. Betsy saw James and then sat for a time with Warner's mother. At first their talk was concerned with the past, and then Mary deliberately approached a private concern and discussed with her future daughter-in-law the subject that was agitating Warner elsewhere.

"There's some things that not even the dearest friends can speak about if they be made of good stuff," Mrs. Lidstone began, "and I'll make bold to say no women parted by a generation are closer and dearer than you and me, Betsy. But where Warner's the matter we haven't got many secrets from each other I reckon, so tell me—not for his ear, but only mine—why for you think it wise to hold off any longer. He's not easily fretted, but a good bit is weighing on his mind, and his face is a book to me, where I can read his worries like print. If you've got the simple-mindedness of my Warner, you're too straight to pretend, or hide things; and both ends and the middle of it are just this: you ought to be married, so why are you hanging fire? Knowing you so well, I'll lay there's a reason; but do you feel sure it's a good one? If you're in doubt, why not give Warner the benefit of it, my dear love, and name the day?"

Betsy did not answer immediately. This appeal surprised her, for she believed that Mary Lidstone better understood the motives for her delay than anybody else. She had suspected that Warner's mother was quite as conscious of the present situation as his sweetheart; she guessed that Mary would very fully comprehend the problem as it appealed to Betsy herself.

But now the elder spoke as though reality were hidden from her mind.

Betsy, therefore, voiced her surprise.

"I've fancied all along, somehow, that you knew why I was hanging fire. It was only the hope that you knew without any words from me, that kept me silent about it. For this seemed just one of those things you mention, that can't be spoke very well between even the closest friends. But I thought, somehow, you understood."

Mrs. Lidstone nodded.

"I'm afraid I did, Betsy, and now I see that I did. But it was just because I hoped I was wrong, that I put it up to you. I wish I'd been mistook with all my heart."

"So do I. But wishes can't blind me. I can't act on my wishes. Love's no great thing if it won't help you to see straight. Anyway, my love for him makes me see straight. Wouldn't you do just what I'm doing? Come now, Mrs. Lidstone, if you were faced with this, would you name the day? I can well understand that you want me to—for Warner's sake, as you think. I can even understand that he wants me to—such an honourable, big-minded man as he is. But—but—think for a moment how it looks to me."

"You fine thing! You put me right, and I'm sorry I asked a question that I might well have known the answer to. Yes, Betsy, I do want you to wed him, for his salvation and lasting good and happiness. And he——"

"I'll tell you exactly what he wants," interrupted the visitor. "Warner's known to me only less clearly than he is to you; and because this thing has to do with love of women and I'm one of them, I may even see it clearer than you. A mother's love is different. He wants to marry me and he's vexed with me, because I won't name the day. And he's vexed because he feels—as an honest man—that the sooner he's wedded to me, the better, not only for me, but for his own peace of mind. He'd be in no hurry; he'd never seek to drive me if I was his all—you know him well enough to know that. It's because he knows I'm not his all, because, since he offered for me and I took him, another is free—the one who was his first love and who still is and must be his first love for evermore. The case was altered when your nephew died—altered down to the very roots; and while his religion and his feeling for justice and all that's seemly and right makes him know where he stands, his heart has got to be heard and shouts him down sometimes. Not along with me—never with me; but out of his simple, stark honesty. He can't pretend; he can't hide anything that's in his mind. So I've got to wait a little longer—not for my own sake, but for his. I'm very nearly clear—not quite."

"This is a cruel come-along-of-it," said Mrs. Lidstone, "and I see where it puts you. And I'm blessed if I know how to put it as it looks to me. You see you're holding off for Warner's sake; while, of course, from my point of view, if you held on and married him so quick as ever it was possible to do so, I should feel you were saving all his hopes of future happiness from the threat of destruction. One thing I can assure you: he doesn't dream of what's in your mind—that I'm sure."

"No; but he dreams of what's in his own. He can't help that. He's a very human man. Look at it. The girl he first loved—free again—more beautiful than ever she was—wiser and more full of appeal to any such as Warner. Don't you see, Mrs. Lidstone? It's just a case for being patient and reasonable. Granted that he wants to marry me as much as ever he did; but knowing him, and loving him, and looking forward, can I force his hand? Ask yourself this—out of justice to him. Suppose he'd thought about me in a friendly way, and even felt a bit of gratitude to me for one thing and another in the past, after his disappointment, would he even then have asked me to marry him, or thought of me for a moment as his wife, if Gilyan had been free again? You know now, by seeing his attitude to Gilyan and his feeling for her, that he would not. Then what's left for me, if I'm a decent woman?"

"But go deeper. For love of Warner, you'd give up Warner. That's what you mean, of course, Betsy. Then, as you've put a question to me, let me put one to you. If this was somebody else and you knew a girl who would make a better wife for a certain man than another girl, wouldn't you in sober reason rather see the man married to the better wife than the worse?"

"Of course I would."

"Look at yourself from the outside then, and be as fair to yourself as to Gilyan. Would you, or Gilyan, be most like to serve Warner faithfulest and be his best help-mate and the best mother for his children? In ten years from now, what would my son be thinking if he wed away from you? I well know."

"You can't know, dear Mrs. Lidstone. Two parties go to a marriage, and it's beyond the power of any living creature, even his mother, to say what's the best sort of a wife for a man. There's no rules. We say the strong man likes a weak woman, or the weak man did ought to have a strong manager for wife and so on; but there's no rules, and marriage confounds and upsets everything that wise people say about it. A strong man may hate a weak woman, and a weak man may loathe a strong woman. A pair, weak as worms, may be gloriously happy together and indifferent to all that wise people prophesy about 'em, and every sort of combination, or opposition of character, may be a great success, when it ought not according to reason, or an utter failure, when it ought to be a great success. And that means you can't certainly say that Warner wouldn't be a lot happier with Gilyan than ever he would be with me."

Mary reflected before answering.

"Love has made a wise girl of you seemingly, as well as a mighty brave one," she said. "I never was faced with such a coil in my whole life, Betsy. I saw something of this before you did, I reckon. But I couldn't believe it and I thought, after that business in London, when the air was thick with tragedy and all that, and we were on wires and our nerves jarred every minute—I thought we'd get back to reality when all was ended."

"So we have."

"If we have, then 'tis a sorry make-shift for the reality I'd hoped for and thanked God for. But what next? If you're so bitter sure of yourself and him—what are you waiting for?"

"Because I'm not sure of Gilyan. It's too soon—too soon to ask her what she's feeling about it. I'm very sorry for Warner that this has fallen to him. He's born to have poor speed in love, poor chap, though so lucky in all else. But it can't be long. I shall very soon know all about Gilyan. I'm only waiting because I don't know. I'm not proud. I love him a lot too well to be proud. Let a little time pass: it can't be long."

"You're very wonderful, my dear, and the man that's worthy of you would take a bit of finding," said Mary. "We'll leave it at that for the minute then. And I can only say I hope from the bottom of my soul she won't——"

Mrs. Lidstone broke off, for Warner had returned. He was surprised to see Betsy, who had come unexpectedly; but he was glad to see her and not until an hour later, when they were alone and Warner saw her home again, did any note of discord faintly jar. He begged her once again to name the date of their marriage.

"It's getting a thought beyond a joke, Betsy," he declared. "And I can't help thinking that if you were a little more sensitive to it you'd see you put me in rather a false position. You remember the past. I needn't go over that. I'm a man with a painful experience behind him. Is it exactly kind to set people talking and remembering things about me that a loyal friend would be the first to forget? Gilyan, I may tell you, only tonight wondered why you couldn't decide."

"Did she, Warner?"

"She did. And she loves you only less than I do."

"I thought we agreed for spring when we were in London."

"That's a long time ago and waiting is a fool's game, anyway. I want to hurry. I've got reasons for marrying now; and you've none against that, I know. I much want you settled at Orchard Lands before winter."

"I have reasons for delay and my reasons are quite good. Think a little. Be kind, Warner. We've both gone through a great deal lately. We can't suffer such things and go unmarked. And think this out, that I'm going to say. It sounds difficult, but I believe you may see the answer. Perhaps your reason for wanting to marry so quick is just the very same as my reason for wanting to take a little time. Do you understand that?"

He used an oath—with him a very rare outlet for vexation.

"Be damned if I do," he said.

"Well, think of it, all the same. Nothing ever frightens you—not even a glimpse of your own heart. And that means you're as brave as you're honest."

He fell silent upon this and she perceived that she had hurt him, yet felt the situation too serious to regret it. If Warner still remained blind, it was time that his eyes should be opened for him. And Betsy thought of herself also. She had told Mrs. Lidstone that she was not proud; but that assertion by no means recorded the truth. She was proud: no woman could possess her mental distinction without being so.

Warner answered at last and his anger had vanished.

"You're speaking in riddles and only for my good, I expect. But am I clever enough to read the riddles, Betsy?"

"Quite, dear Warner. So set your mind to work to thresh it out. Then you'll see what I mean and know why I said it."

"That I'm pushing on just for the same reason that you're holding off?"

"Yes—you can put it like that. And when you've found out the real, true reason why you want our marriage ever so quick—when you've found that, you'll find why I don't intend it shall be quick."

"I'd sooner be love-making than puzzling over such nonsense."

She laughed.

"I've often wanted to be love-making when it was you who set me puzzles instead," she answered. "So we're quits there."

"Well—it's all beyond me, Betsy."

"Then you must over-get it and master it, Warner."

They fell silent and she knew that he was really aggrieved. At the door of the 'Church House' he bade her 'good-night,' but refused her invitation to come in. Nor did he kiss her.

"I'll be off and use my poor wits," he said.

"They're rare good wits, because you don't let self-love blind 'em," she answered. "And I try to copy you there."

He strode off, leaving her with the last word. A full moon had broken up the cloud-banks now and swam over the high tops of the elms. Frost was got into the air and Warner's inner heat and agitated thoughts took physical shape, for his breast laboured and flung out puffs of vapour upon the silvery night. She had been too subtle for him, and he went home discontented and troubled and honestly ignorant of her meaning. She was absolutely right; but he had yet to know it, and discovery was delayed by a sense of wrong under which, for the moment, he laboured.

CHAPTER XXVII

SEPTIMUS SEES THE POINT

A FEW persons interested in the wedding of James Woodley and Melinda Wedlake assembled on the night following the ceremony in Paul Neck's parlour. Everything had proceeded well and now James and his bride were on their way to Cornwall. Mrs. Neck found herself a little tearful, while Septimus Wedlake was in an elated mood. But he felt more interest in his own affairs than his daughter's wedding.

They drank port together and, about nine o'clock, there entered to the family party Matthew Fawden from Orchard Lands. He joined the circle as one among Paul's first friends, and now heard Septimus explain the meaning of his personal satisfaction.

"Just in time for a bit of good news, that I've kept for the end of the day," said Wedlake. "I'm going to kill a lie, Matthew, and that's a righteous thing to do when the chance offers."

"And a mighty difficult thing to do," declared the publican.

"Yes, because with a lie, especially if it's a spicy one, nobody wants it killed. People would rather believe an exciting falsehood than a dull fact, and it's a lot more salt to life to hear of our neighbours doing wickedness than keeping on the straight path. Fine lies brighten the heart—more shame to human nature—and even though they be laid sooner or later, yet they've done their part: you've had the fun of 'em."

"And what lie are you going to lay?" asked Sarah Neck.

"I'll tell you," answered Septimus. "To begin with, nobody sees the beauty of me in this damned place. I ought to be thanked and richly rewarded for the things I do, and if I was gone, the Marldons would find one of their brightest subjects for conversation lost to 'em. Now everybody's whispering that I ain't going to marry Mrs. Baker after all, and taking a fearful joy in the thought. But that's a lie, for only today, after our children's wedding, Sarah, I met Andy Baker, waiting for me in the churchyard, and he's told me that he's to work on the bill of divorcement."

"Thank God for that," said Mrs. Neck.

"You may, of course. But, if Andy told truth, you've got to thank somebody at Brixham. There's a widow there that the shoe-smith met quite by chance—or perhaps it might be righter to say at the will of his Maker. Anyway he's to divorce Jane so quick as the law can act, and then she'll find herself Mrs. Septimus Wedlake in a brace of shakes."

"Very good news indeed," vowed Paul. "I couldn't have heard nothing to please me better."

"Another wedding," murmured Sarah.

"No—not another. Far from it. The clergy haven't been at all nice over this little affair. Vicar and curate both have showed a good bit of feeling and a lot of narrowness. So long as I obeyed the law they support, they wasn't too civil to me, nor yet to her. They want it both ways, they churchmen; but they ain't going to see the colour of my money after saying what they did say to me in the open street. I go to the registry office at Paignton, and Mrs. Baker's entirely of my mind. There's a lot of insulted, divorced persons driven out of their church by the parsons."

"You've always boasted you was Church of England," said Matthew Fawden.

"And still remain so," replied the elder; "but I shall wait till vicar be took off by death, or else retires in the course of nature, and then I may give the new man a chance and turn to 'em again towards my latter end; but not sooner. I won't have no truck with narrowness."

"And what's your best news, Matthew?" asked Paul. "You did ought to have been at the wedding if you ax me."

"I've come along to say there's two barrels of the best waiting for you now if you want 'em," answered the apple man.

"Of course I want 'em. Mrs. Lidstone knows that very well indeed. She was to church today, but I hadn't no speech with her, nor yet with Warner. They wouldn't come to the wedding dinner, though I much wanted for 'em to be there, and so did Sarah."

"To be frank——" began Matthew; but as he spoke Betsy came in and her father poured out a glass of port for her.

"Now we'll all drink to the health of the bride and groom for the third and last time of drinking," he said. "They're a rare good pair and I hope they'll be happy and prosperous."

It was Septimus who reminded Matthew of his broken sentence.

"And what was you going to be frank about?" he asked; but Fawden did not oblige him.

"No odds," he answered, and conversation became general until the barman brought Paul the keys and announced that he had closed for the night.

Then, when Betsy and her step-mother were gone to bed and only Paul, Septimus and Matthew remained, the last turned to Mr. Wedlake and spoke of the matter in his mind.

"I couldn't answer you afore her," said Mr. Fawden—"before your daughter I mean, Paul. For why? Because we be faced with something very distracting at Orchard Lands for the moment and though I don't know nought about love and don't want to, you must be blind if you don't see the smashing disasters and hateful troubles it brings nine times out of every ten."

Paul Neck nodded gloomily. His face had fallen and he showed anxiety if not actual distress.

"I ain't in her secrets—not yet; but both me and Sarah know there's a hitch, though Lord only can tell what it is," he answered. "With any other man than Warner Lidstone, I should have been down his throat afore now, to get some sense from him and a bit of light on the situation; but one like him, above doubt or suspicion—well, I'm beat. I must make time to go down and see his mother. I'm breathing bad air for the minute."

"Mrs. Lidstone's properly distracted, and so is he—because she is," explained Matthew. "Why don't Betsy name the day? All I hear is that the trouble arises there."

"There's a lot more in it than that," declared Paul—"a lot more. Betsy's the most reasonable woman I ever saw or heard about. Made of reason, as my daughter should be. She don't name the day because she can't name the day; and if she can't, you may bet your life there's a deep and serious cause."

"Warner Lidstone don't know it then. I can assure you he's terrible fretted. And I do think she ought to tell him."

Then Septimus spoke.

"Do you want to know where the shoe pinches and where the trouble is? Because if you do, Paul, I can tell you. As you may have heard, I be fond of little walks in the country to study the ways of nature. And them little walks often show surprises about human nature as well as birds and beasts. And not so long since I marked your future son-in-law comforting the young widow—Gilyan."

"Comforting her, Sep?"

"All quite right and proper. Not an evil thought in his mind; just walking beside her and saying high-minded things to console her, and so on. All well within religion and nice feeling. And yet he didn't know what was behind it more than a bird knows what is behind it when it bursts into song."

"And what was behind it?" asked Matthew.

"Do you need to ask, my dear? Paul knows; and so would Betsy know."

"You've opened my eyes, Wedlake. I'll bet my life Betsy does know, and that's why things are as they are."

He turned to Matthew.

"The truth what Septimus has discovered is just this," he continued. "Warner don't know how nature's working in him. He's all unconscious—clamouring for Betsy to name the day with one voice and comforting Gilyan with another. He's fooling himself that he still wants to marry Betsy, and really under the pretence, hankering with all his soul after the widow."

"No pretence neither," explained Septimus. "That's the interesting thing about human nature. Never was a more honourable fool than Warner Lidstone. It ain't in his wildest thought to throw over Betsy. He'd die afore he'd do anything crooked, that man; and yet he's not got enough cunning to hide what he really wants; and when your daughter knows what he wants, she'll do something that will surprise Warner out of his skin very near. And when he declares his astonishment, it won't be humbug. Such a jolter-head is he between they two women that he'll find himself in a proper miz-maze when Betsy——"

Mr. Wedlake did not finish his sentence, but struck a match and relighted his pipe.

"When Betsy does what?" asked Mr. Fawden, who was lost amid these subtleties.

"Leave it, Matt," urged Paul Neck. "Don't follow that out. If Septimus is right, there's trouble coming to some of us—and, in a way, nobody to blame for it. But Sep's such a curious and inquiring man that I'm afraid he is right. I should like to know what Jennifer Purchase is thinking. For maybe my daughter has confided a bit to her."

Matthew's slow mind had worked up to another question.

"What the devil business is Gilyan Lidstone of Warner Lidstone's?" he asked. "That's the whole point."

"Not his business—his pleasure," explained Wedlake. "You see they know one another so well that now Gilyan's thrown and have got to begin again, what more natural that the man, who was so much to her once——? And she, being the close friend of Betsy, makes it all the more natural. In fact I'm sure neither of 'em has any idea that they be doing anything outside reason. But you say 'Jennifer.' I had speech with her not a week gone and found her far too much interested in her own bad luck to think much of aught else. Poor as a coot we know her to be, but 'tis wrongful pride that keeps her poor, and I've no patience with poor people who deny the rich ones their privilege and duty of helping such as happen to have drawn blank. Why—damn it—charity would perish out of the land if we was all like Jennifer. She's silly proud in one way, and yet no pride whatever in another. So full of her griefs she is, that she must spend half her time dinning 'em into other people. In fact, she's one of they martyrs who know they are martyrs, and be always yelping about it to the patient ones who are kind enough to listen. And that's only to martyr the innocent."

"They say one martyr makes many," answered Paul and Septimus laughed.

"I never liked her," declared Matthew. "She didn't shine by no means when she was young, and she's got a cranky nature—the beastly sort that always envies your good luck and never pities your bad."

"That's going too far, Matt," declared the publican. "I can't think the poor soul be unkind—only just slipping down hill and losing her brain power when it might have been most use to her."

They finished their bottle, while Matthew and Septimus argued concerning human nature and Paul fell back upon thoughts of Betsy, which rendered him taciturn and abstracted.

Then the voice of Sarah descended upon them from an upper chamber.

"Go home, you men, and let my husband come to bed."

CHAPTER XXVIII

RENUNCIATION

A FEW days later, Betsy sought her step-mother. Help and counsel she needed, and the circumstances were such that to Mrs. Lidstone she could not well go again. They differed, too vitally. Sarah would prove impartial, and before committing herself to a step from which there could be no return, Betsy took opportunity to consult Mrs. Neck. They were walking together to evensong when she spoke, and so grave was the subject, so pressing the problem, that her step-mother abandoned evening prayers.

"I ain't much in the spirit for church," she said, "not tonight, so we'll go back. I know you've got a nasty thing fretting you, Betsy, and my feeling is that you ain't being treated none too well. It's a soft night and we'll walk along a bit. Why for don't you speak to Mrs. Lidstone?"

"She's in it too deep," explained the girl. "You're outside and can help a lot better than her, Sarah. She's the man's mother."

"Well, tell me then; but I'm not sure I shan't advise you to see Mary—mother or no mother. She's far too swift-minded not to know all about it; and he's under her eyes all the time, so she'd know more of the truth than what I do, or you either."

"The truth's plain enough I'm fearing," answered Betsy quietly. "It's painful to say, but not half so painful as it is to feel it. And I feel it so sharp that I've very nearly caught myself crying out by night. Warner Lidstone——"

"Don't now! Look at home first. Are you dead sure that if you named the day it wouldn't set everything right? If he's changed, are you sure it ain't because you make him think that you have?"

"But why have I changed? You don't know that and you've got to know. His mother does. I've changed because I'm not blind, Sarah, and I know now that, while Warner still wants to marry me, because he stands committed to do so, he loves somebody else far better than me. I know that if I died tonight, he'd be offering for Gilyan again before six months was over. And I'm not blaming him. She was his first and he only turned to me for gratitude, not love. He thought he loved me, just as Gilyan thought she loved him, and I don't blame him for what's happened to me any more than I blamed her for what happened to Warner. But it's a time for facing the truth. What's the sense of his marrying me now? I wouldn't say it was even decent. I've put off deciding week after week and month after month; but I can put off no longer and the only thing that seems left to do——"

"Don't say it!" interrupted Mrs. Neck. "I'm not at all certain if you've got Warner right; it may be false fear is forcing you to a wrong opinion. Do nothing till you know a lot more. I have a powerful feeling you may be all wrong, Betsy. Warner's engaged to you, and that puts him out of the market once for all. And a young man out of the market is in a different position from them not already tokened. An engaged man is next to a married man and may be considered safe in any company. And him being engaged, Gilyan may feel there's no reason why she should not have his companionship and friendship. Then, again, she's your first woman friend: you've been like sisters more than cousins, and she's got to thank you for more than can be told, both afore she was married and since. Is it in the power of belief that Gilyan would do anything to make you unhappy behind your back? I'm not one of her admirers, as you know, but I've been very sorry for her, and I reckon she's learned her lesson, and I do not believe of her that she would——"

"She wouldn't, she wouldn't," broke in Betsy. "Neither she nor Warner would do anything against me. Both are loyal and true to me. But that doesn't prevent 'em from being true to themselves. I don't know anything about what's in Gilyan's mind, for of course I can't take this story to her; and if I did, she'd be properly heart-broken that I could think of such a thing. But Warner can't help loving her, as he always did love her. He never stopped loving her, Sarah. Just because a woman is married, that don't stop a sea-deep thing like the first love Warner had for her. It went on, and he was loving her when he offered to marry me; and if he'd known that Harold was going to die presently, his hope would have shot up again and he'd never have looked at me, nor yet thought about me."

"There's three in this, Betsy, and you're leaving out one," answered Mrs. Neck slowly. "Granted for the sake of argument that Warner finds himself in love with Gilyan. Well, what about her? She found she didn't love him before, and what's happened to make her change now?"

"A thousand things. His goodness and kindness over her husband; his unsleeping thought for her; her experience and her new understanding of him and what he means and stands for. His health and strength; his prospects; the certainty of peace and prosperity; the power to help her grandmother. Things must be as they must, and I think a lot too well of Gilyan to believe that she'd pretend, or that she ever did pretend. To me what she really feels, or doesn't feel, makes no difference now. It's what he feels; and if she refused him a thousand times, the fact remains—or so I think it—that he loves her in a way he never did, or could love me. And not a shadow of blame, Sarah, not a shadow of blame. He's only being true to the first woman he ever did love, and it's beyond his power to be different. And since he's firm to marry me and never dreams of doing anything else, it's up to me now. He's uneasy and knows what's in his heart; and he don't forgive himself for it like I forgive him. His conscience hurts him and tells him he is doing wrong—as if a poor wretch was to tell himself he was wicked because he had red hair.''

''I don't know,'' answered Sarah. ''He's got to think of you, and if he had more character——''

''There again: he's himself. His character is what it is. We can leave that. I love him a lot too well to wreck his life.''

''You're more likely to wreck it if you throw him over.''

''So his mother says; but she's wrong. I shouldn't wreck his life—not if what he wanted followed my refusal. But my fix is just this, Sarah. Suppose what he wanted didn't follow? I can tell him tomorrow that I don't think we should make a very happy pair; but I can't tell Gilyan to marry him. She might in fulness of time; and on the other hand she might find somebody to suit her better. Enough has happened to change her, as I said; but it may not have changed her.''

''I hate this,'' declared the elder. ''It makes me wild, and I think you're going a lot too far and imagining a lot more than the truth. It's a fearful upheaval for you, and I beg you'll sleep on it and ask the Lord to throw a bit of light. It's a very lofty line to take, I dare say; but it's a very doubtful line, and you may wreck Warner once and for all if you're all wrong in your ideas. Look close to it that there's no jealousy in you, Betsy, and remember the man's been thrown over once before. He's not very clever or far-seeing. He doesn't dream of what's in your mind; and perhaps what you think is in his mind, is not and never was. You've only got your opinion to back you, and for my part I honestly believe that if

Warner had found himself feeling for Gilyan like he did before, he'd very soon have dropped her and taken good care to keep away from her."

"He does know what he's feeling; and for that reason he's at me to name the day. A simple chap like him supposes that, once he's married to me, he'll think of Gilyan no more. He thinks marriage with me will be his salvation."

"Well, so think I; and so thinks his mother."

"No, you're all wrong. It might have been once—not now."

"Do this—I beg you to do this," urged Mrs. Neck. "Put your pride in your pocket, Betsy, and see Mary again. Strip it bare and let her hear every syllable you've told me this minute. She's a wise and honest woman and she may see it a lot more like you see it than I do. Or she may not. But for all our sakes, my dear, do trust her. Who better can you trust? Who be more likely to know what's best for her only son than her? I'm sure that's good advice, and I do hope you'll find you can take it. See her tomorrow."

Sarah found herself very agitated. She took Betsy's arm and continued to plead until the girl unwillingly consented to follow this advice. But she made it clear that not even Mary was likely to change her intention.

"I'll do this," she said. "I'll write to Warner Lidstone tonight—a patient and kindly letter—and I'll weigh every word, Sarah, before I set it down. And I'll go to Orchard Lands and see his mother and read the letter to her, or let her read it to herself. She's the soul of honesty as you say; and if she bids me not give the letter to Warner, I will not. But I think she will support me. She hates all pretences, same as I do; and you may pretend over a honeymoon, perhaps, but you can't pretend over a married life. And I will never, never marry any man who loves another woman, even though he thinks he does not."

"I suppose that's all right and I thank you for consenting to do so much," answered the other with a deep sigh. "What's come over life I don't know. Is it the rising generation have grown more difficult than it need be, or was it always the same and we middle-aged ones have forgot? However, you can't go wrong if you do that. Before Warner reads that you have thrown him over on account of the widow, let his mother read it. The rest is for Providence to decide."

They fell silent, and that night, while Mrs. Neck bemoaned the situation to Paul, who shared her growing indignation against his daughter's betrothed, Betsy wrote and re-wrote until she had completed a letter to suit the situation.

"Mary won't read a word she don't know already—not until she comes to the end," reflected the writer, and then, as at a deed accomplished, she went to bed. Not until sleepless hours had passed and the church clock chimed three did she slumber. But before that a great sense of loss had overtaken her. Because now, with the thing accomplished, came suffering and sorrow for herself.

Mrs. Lidstone was alone when Betsy came to her early on the following morning; and the moment that the younger stated her wish, Mary knew that what her heart had long foretold was about to happen.

They kissed and then, without wasted words, the visitor produced her letter.

"I want for you to read this and tell me if it isn't the right and proper thing, Mrs. Lidstone," she said. "I've wrote it for Warner, but I'll be greatly obliged if you can spare five minutes to run over it. Because I well know you'll ask yourself what you would have done in my place. Only you and me know exactly what is happening—what has happened, you may say. But there it is, and I can see in your face you understand, only less bitter clear than I do. So I ask again if this had fallen to you, what better you could have done than write this letter to—to the man?"

"I know what's in your letter, Betsy," replied Warner's mother. The day was wet and Mary sat sewing at the window. She dropped her work and extended her hand for the letter. She read it very slowly. Its tenor little surprised her, for she had long perceived that Betsy would be faced with this necessity. She could hope against hope no more. But the inexorable, almost stern wording of the letter did astonish her. It was short and dignified and exceedingly definite; and Mary could not question one word of it, because, in similar circumstances, she would have written such another. Her respect for Betsy was increased, and with it her sorrow, that Warner Lidstone had lost something infinitely precious. But she was just and she signified agreement with a slow nod as she handed the letter back.

"I might have made this easier for you, Betsy," she said after a silence. "I might even have prevented it; for if I had spoken to Warner and opened his eyes, things would have happened different—outwardly. But I let it alone; because to alter things outwardly is vain, when you well know you can't alter them inwardly. I wouldn't ask you to change a word of that letter. He must sting for it, and so must I and all who care about him; but you are dead right to give him up. I know that since last I saw you."

"I'm very thankful you think so," answered the other. "I haven't come to it easy—you can guess how hard it was. But it's got to be. I've known it a long time and I've had it on the point of my tongue to tell Warner; but I felt as you do. What was the good of telling him? He couldn't help it."

"Being himself, he couldn't; and being yourself, you've naturally got no more use for a man who loves another woman better than he loves you. For so it stands. There's no shadow of doubt, Betsy. You'll guess I've looked into it with all my wits, and I know Warner's every look and tone. He understands the truth now. Don't think he doesn't understand."

"I'm thinking of what comes after," said Betsy. "I care so much for his future. Can you say what Gilyan is feeling for him?"

"Gilyan only knows that he's clamouring to you to name the day. I mean that's all he thinks she knows. Of course, one so quick as her must see that he's in love with her still. But what she's like to do when she hears you've given him up, I can't say. She'll probably come praying to you to change your mind and take him back."

Lucy Lidstone entered at this moment and quickly gathered that the expected trial had come. She saw Betsy's face and tears upon her mother's—a sight that few had ever seen—and she plunged into the sea of trouble. She took a line opposite to Mary's and pleaded rather for Warner than anybody else.

"Don't you see, either of you, the other side? You're a mother-hearted woman, Betsy, same as mother is, and you know, if you're honest, one thing that I've put before mother a thousand times. And it was that thing that kept her dumb, though it ought to have made her speak. Ask yourself this. You love Warner. That goes without saying. You would never have took him for a day if you hadn't loved him. Very well then. Put this question, and if you can't answer it, mother can. Warner being what he is—half an angel, half a fool—who would make him the better, wiser, helpfuller wife—you, or Gilyan Lidstone? Answer honest. You *know*, Betsy. And being out for my brother first, last and always, it properly breaks my heart to think you can't bear with him a little longer. Once married to you, this fog would clear out of his mind for ever more, and in a month he'd be thankful for his salvation. For Christ's sake put your pride away, Betsy, and go through with it.''

But Lucy's argument took no account of Betsy herself, and this her mother pointed out.

''You're all for Warner and rightly so,'' she said. ''Never a sister loved a brother better, and a good and beautiful thing it was to see him and you grow up together. I love Warner, too, and it's been beyond the power of words to say my thankfulness when Betsy took him; but not since Gilyan came home again. Warner is like everybody else; he's got to taste life at first hand and suffer for his defects as well as his qualities.''

''What will happen—what will happen, when he hears that Betsy isn't going to marry him?'' cried the girl wildly. ''Don't you know that the first thing he'll do is to go back to that woman? The fool—the fool——''

Lucy wept over Warner to see his bright hopes shattered, and when Betsy was gone, having sealed her letter and left it for him, Lucy still mourned.

''He's ruined himself,'' she sobbed.

CHAPTER XXIX

ADVICE

JAMES WOODLEY fell in with his father-in-law, towards dusk of evening, when Septimus was in the way to Withy Lease. The newly married man rejoiced in his own home and his wedded state.

''Ah, Jimmy,'' said Mr. Wedlake. ''Well met, my dear. No need to ax you how you fancy yourself as a husband, for the light shines on your face. As for me I'm in your hands as you know. I promised not to intrude upon your fine home and I don't cross the drexel* without you invite me; but if ever you feel as though you would like for me to see the comforts you've arranged for Melinda, I can always drop in and pick a bone.''

James was uneasy.

''All in good time,'' he said. ''A bargain's a bargain, and I'll ax you to keep it, Mr. Wedlake—at any rate till me and my wife have settled down in double harness. All goes very well, I believe, but we hope the neighbours, yourself included, won't come poking in much just yet. I've said the same to my own mother, for that matter. There's a good bit of trouble in the air where I work, I may tell you, though, thank God, nothing to do with me.''

''I know all about that,'' answered Septimus. ''The parish be humming with it.''

''My step-sister—so to call her—Betsy Neck, have thrown over Warner Lidstone. You could have knocked me down with a feather—such a steadfast woman as Betsy. But there's more in it than meets the eyes."

**Drexel.* Threshold.

"Perhaps not more than have met my eye. Men are like knives—some sharp and some blunt—and Warner's one of the blunt sort. The sharp men cut clean. You may take me for an example of that kind; but Mary Lidstone, though sharp herself, have got a terrible blunt son. And the blunt ones boggle and do a lot of painful hacking. Let him be a lesson to you jog-trot chaps, James. I've had all this out with Paul Neck, who, being Betsy's father, upheld her very rightly. But he keeps calm as usual. He's the most clear-eyed of the bunch, as you would expect."

"He did ought to be fiercer with Warner Lidstone," declared James. "If you know, as we all do, that my master be hankering after the flesh-pots of that widow again, then you feel he's a very second-rate sort of person for all his virtues. For a man to turn down such a woman for Gilyan—us ought to be hot about it."

"He didn't turn down Betsy," answered the other; "he only made it needful for Betsy to turn him down. And that's a different thing. He didn't plot and plan for Betsy to do the dirty work and let him out of his engagement, nor nothing like that. He went blundering on, like a bumblebee against a window, wanting things to come right, and trying to do what he thought was right. The only trouble with Warner Lidstone is that he happens to be a mumphead. His heart's sound, but his skull be next door to empty. And I give that sort a wide berth myself, because they make more trouble in the world than the rascals."

"He's terrible put about and far ways from his usual behaviour," explained James. "You might say a new man was got in his skin. He roams, like a cow that have had her calf took away. So grim as a ghost one day, and hard and short till you be feared to go nigh him. And then, the next, he's meek as Moses and sorry for his rough speech. He keeps out of sight a lot and wanders the country, and

I hear that at meal times he's dumb and hardly lets down any food worth naming. A wisht place be Orchard Lands for the minute and I'm thankful to go home to my meals as I do. 'Cheat-the-Boys' have cheated her best friend now. And Lord alone knows what'll happen next.''

''You be like all outsiders—often bother a lot more over a thing than them most concerned,'' answered Septimus. ''To show you, James, how much wiser and cooler Betsy and her father be than you, I may tell you that Gilyan Lidstone's going to stop at 'Church House' for a bit when she can be spared from home. Betsy haven't done with her yet. Thorough that woman is in all she undertakes. You can trust her to see it through, because she's above mean motives.''

''Why—why should she, of all females, hold out a helping hand to her that's cut her out?''

Mr. Wedlake regarded his son-in-law with a pursed mouth.

''Just such a damned silly question as we might expect from you, James,'' he answered. ''But put a bridle on your lips, my poor chap. The truth of a man be seen as often in his questions as his answers, and I'm sorry you're touching this delicate subject, for you've not got the sense to do so. The reason why Gilyan Lidstone is asked to 'Church House' is this; and don't you forget it. She's asked to show the world that she's innocent. And she is innocent—everybody's innocent. And what does that show, my poor fellow? It shows that two rights can make a wrong, and that to judge human nature be a fool's trick every time.''

''You can't have trouble without somebody being to blame for it,'' argued Jimmy, but Mr. Wedlake declined to argue.

''Pretty near all the trouble in the world arises from character, James; and quite as much from good character as from bad. These things be too deep for you, so you'd best keep out of 'em and not take sides. And tell Melinda the same. 'Tis not grasping these mysteries that make people judge their neighbours and lose their charity and darken council. Now I'm going to see Jennifer Purchase about shooting some of the wild duck that harbours in Withy Lease at this season. There's a lot of useful money being throwed away because 'Frog's' ill. Not that he shoots very straight when he's well. So I must help the old woman as well as myself."

They parted without more words, but Mr. Wedlake met another acquaintance before he reached his destination and fell in with Warner Lidstone. The young man was returning with an empty basket from Withy Lease and he appeared to find consolation in the spectacle of Septimus and his famous lurcher. He stooped, patted the dog and spoke. Though now nearly dark Wedlake perceived that Warner was haggard and that he looked older than his age. Ignoring his own advice to James, therefore, the elder determined to speak should Lidstone give him an opportunity; and before they parted, the apple-grower did so.

"Been taking a basket of good fruit to Mark Fawden," explained Warner. "He's mending, but he's had a sharp pinch of fever this time and kept his bed on it."

They fell into talk and Warner, aware that Mr. Wedlake was a friend of Paul Neck's, asked a question.

"You're an understanding man, Sep, and know the world. You've heard of this terrible affair. It's left me in a miz-maze, because, God's my judge, I never expected it. What does Paul say?"

"Ax him if you want to know," answered Septimus. "This is a kicklish matter, Warner Lidstone, and the less outsiders have got to tell about it the better."

"I must go up to see him."

"How much do you understand and grasp of this affair?" inquired the elder.

"I understand that Betsy found out certain things hid in my mind that I hadn't found out for myself—or so she thought. Perhaps you might help me, Wedlake, you being known to all the parties. If you believe what I tell you now, will you drop it into Paul's ear, so it shall be understood by him?"

"I shall certainly believe you, because you'd never make a liar. But what can you tell me I don't know? The whole truth is that, after Jennifer's grand-daughter was free, your old feeling for her woke up again. And Betsy saw it, as a clever girl was bound to do. On your side, knowing what you felt and having no wish to escape your duty, or do a dishonorable thing, you pushed for marriage, so as the door might be shut on Gilyan once for all. But, of course, that weren't going to be good enough for Betsy; and finding where your mind turned, she set herself free."

Warner expressed his great surprise.

"I thought I'd hid my hateful feelings. I didn't know that a man could care about two women at the same time."

"Didn't you? Well, now you do. But not in the same degree. One's always uppermost. Sally today, Joan tomorrow, Milly the next day; and then back to Sally again. The human male be very addicted to change, and change is healthy and natural, like the ebb and flow of the sea and the turn of the seasons. But unfortunately, in matters of marriage, change don't suit the English female, they think the laws are stronger than human nature, and get vexed when men break 'em, because every girl is taught to imagine that she will always be enough for the man that loves her. In some cases one woman is enough for a man. You'd have found such a one as Betsy enough for you, and never given her no cause to worrit; and James Woodley will be suited with Melinda for evermore, being that sort of a chap. But it happens sometimes that 'tis the woman, not the man, have spacious ideas; and when a woman likes change and finds it necessary to her content and well-being, then, well—then they don't make the sort of wives plain men like you did ought to seek. In fact, in strict confidence, you're a damned fool all round, and have lost the finest woman that ever came out of the Marldons.''

Warner did not answer immediately.

''I'm not the sort to suit any decent woman, I reckon,'' he said at length. ''And these two were both too good for me, no doubt. It's over and done with now, anyway. I've cut my own throat, so to speak, Sep. Best to bide a bachelor and spare others any more of me.''

''Life may have used you a bit harsh, no doubt,'' granted Wedlake, ''and if there's one sort Providence can't pardon, it's them that don't know their own minds. And, still worse, them that don't know their own hearts. Between me and you, you've got no more than you deserve, Warner. If you hadn't been so simple, I dare say you might have come better out of it. But there it was: you felt, the moment your cousin dropped, that you'd rather have his widow than all Solomon's women put together; and you couldn't hide it, and, of course, Betsy and Gilyan darned soon found it out. And so you stand where you stand; and so amazing easy are you to read and such a child, for all your years, that nobody's going to be particular cross with you, any more than they would be with any other child. Only other children, like Jimmy Woodley, will be cross with you. But children have got to grow up and put away childish things. And they mustn't be vexed if their elders tell 'em their faults. Betsy Neck's gone, no doubt. And as for the other woman, I admire her a lot. She puts me in mind of the fine, large-minded girls I used to know in my youth. I won't even say that she mightn't settle down with you and find a child or two anchor her steady. On the other hand she mighn't. Betting about even, perhaps. What you've got to do is to face reality; and if I've helped you to face it, you did ought to be very much obliged and remember you owe me a good turn if ever I come to you begging.''

"I'll remember," promised Warner. "You don't mince words, but there's truth in what you tell."

"Oh, yes—it's true."

"I feel a guilty man. For two pins I'd clear out of here and take work under some other body and begin life again, far ways off."

"You can't well do that. There's your mother to consider. Best to mark time and live it down and let the women alone for a bit. Get busy and put all your thought into work, or sport. 'Tis one of your failings that you never cared about sport. Sport have saved many a weak one like you."

"Well, I thank you. You'll keep what I've said private, Sep."

"You haven't said nothing," answered the old man. "Good-night. And take my last tip. Think how to pleasure your mother. She's a female you can trust, anyway. She's done everything for you that a mother could do except put her wits in your head; but brains be doled out by the Almighty, according to His far-reaching plan, and if you haven't got 'em, you must submit to such as have. There's always compensations for a kindly man. Some we can forgive for being fools, along of their other qualities. I've never yet met a fool that didn't have a nice side to him; which is more than you can say for many of the wise ones."

Warner sank into the dark and Mr. Wedlake proceeded to Withy Lease. He was in a didactic mood and when, presently, Jennifer began to protest against the bitterness of her lot, he chastened her also.

She and Gilyan sat together in the kitchen, and in the oven a sweet apple was baking for Mark Fawden, who had directed that one should be cooked for his supper.

"I'll look in on him before I go," said Septimus, "but I want a tell with you, Mrs. Purchase, about a subject to pleasure us both."

"I should like to find the subject outside death as would pleasure me," said Jennifer.

"Well, what you're after for the minute, is not death, but money, like the most of us; and I can put a bit in your pocket all right and regular. The wild duck be come. For my part I don't say but what I don't find more fun in shooting another man's bird now and again, than just a wild, natural creature that never belonged to nobody; but duck are always sport, and since good ducks come to your rond, and the woodcocks be very given to the scrub behind the reeds, I'll offer for to shoot as many as I can and share and share alike. Not all fun, mark you, because you've often got to sit out for duck of a frosty night for hours and must slay the creatures as best you can; but me and this dog may be counted on to do pretty clever, and it will mean a good few yellow boys for you before the season's ended."

Gilyan rose and fetched Wedlake's precious pointer some scraps. The dog thanked her with its eyes.

"You can shoot where you like, Septimus Wedlake," declared Mrs. Purchase. "I've always thought there ought to be a few shillings to the marsh birds in winter. I hope something may come of it, but 'tis little likely. I'm past the turning point now and all be over here. When the luck went round I was forgot—a very cowardly cruel thing—and I'd tell my Maker so to His Everlasting Face tomorrow. And I reckon it won't be very long afore I do tell Him. I'm done. My energy be spent; my hope be cold; I want peace and there's only one place for me that offers it."

"Don't you begin that, gran'," urged Gilyan. "Things always turn when they're at their worst. Mark's getting better, and so soon as he's about again——"

"He's not better. He's not going to get better, in my opinion. I see very bad signs in the man."

Gilyan turned to the visitor.

"She's so busy always lamenting the past, that she don't give the future a look-in, Mr. Wedlake. The few good things that happen to her—like selling a brave lot of reed for the Orchard Lands linhey—she takes them without a thought, because——"

"What do you know—you with a life-time to mend your luck?" asked Jennifer. "Trouble in youth be like water on a duck's back. You be only at the beginning of your adventures. You'll come through."

"Everybody's going to come through but you," said Gilyan. "To hear you, gran', you'd think you were the only unlucky creature in the world. And half your ill luck's your own making, too."

Jennifer's eyes flashed.

"How dare you say that?" she cried.

"Perfectly true," declared Mr. Wedlake. "And you mustn't mind plain-speaking, Jennifer Purchase. What stands between you and better fortune be your own stiff neck. Your own silly pride's half the trouble, so you're wrong and unfair to put it all against Providence."

But while Gilyan could quarrel with her grandmother, she would not let another do so. Now, in a moment, she argued against Mr. Wedlake.

Jennifer began to cry and turned her back on both of them. Then Gilyan spoke to Septimus.

"You, that haven't got any pride—true or false—oughtn't to blame it against other people. And what's better than looking back if that's the only thing left in your life? Don't I know?"

"There's a lot can't enjoy the present for thinking of the past, or else fretting to fiddlestrings over the future," began Septimus, then Jennifer spoke again.

"That I don't do anyway," she said, shaking with melancholy and dry-eyed sobs. "I don't worrit over the future for very good reasons, though I shan't tell 'em to you, nor yet anybody else. What do you know about trouble, as never had anything worse than a fortnight in clink in your life? Have you seen your childer drop into the earth like spoiled fruit? Have your days all been broken up through no fault of your own? Have——? But what's the good of asking you questions you can't answer? And if I'm a proud woman and ready to go under with my head up—what then? Can't you understand that some are built of finer stuff than you, who be always ready for charity from anybody who'd fling it at you?"

"True," admitted Septimus. "I've never denied my fellow creature the blessing of lending to the Lord, if they wanted to. Few do. Pride is a luxury, my dears, and you can't have any luxury without paying for it, and a luxury in one direction, that breeds necessity in another, be a terrible silly affair. Don't say hope's dead; because I won't believe that. While Mark Fawden draws breath there's hope under this roof, and if you only listen to him—— However, I'll shoot some of the brave birds and see what I can do. Us all want to help you, without hurting you, Jennifer; but you make it so plaguey difficult. And now what about Warner Lidstone? There's no secrets between him and me, because I've just left the man wandering through the night like a lost dog. And how do it stand? I'm not axing for curiosity, and there's no call for anybody to lose their nerve; but if we sensible ones can help——"

"It stands like this," answered Jennifer, rubbing her eyes with the fringe of her shawl, "and if you don't like the subject, Gilyan, you can go away."

"I'm not going while you talk of that," answered her grand-daughter. "Mr. Wedlake's a close friend of Uncle Paul and I can tell him just exactly what I shall tell Uncle and Betsy, when I stop along with them next week. I swear before God I've had nothing to do with this business, and I'm working so hard as I know how to put it right."

"Don't then," urged Septimus. "Don't work at it. Leave it alone."

"Leave it alone! Leave Betsy to think I've sloaked Warner away from her behind her back? . . . My God, I'd rather—there's nothing I wouldn't rather do. That woman have been the best and truest friend to me after my husband that I ever had, or ever shall. I bless every hair on her head, and to bring sorrow in her life would ruin mine for good. She shan't give him up. I'll go on my knees to her; I'll——"

"Stop!" commanded Mr. Wedlake. "For the Lord's sake, keep your nerve, Gilyan. Betsy Neck knows perfectly that you ain't the willing cause of this confusion. But she knows more than that: she knows there can be no happiness for her with a man that loves you; and she also knows the poor wretch can no more help loving you than he can help going to sleep of a night or waking up in the morning. The man wants to marry her. He's looking like a lank-jawed ghost from the tomb and sagging at the knees worse than ever, because she's turned him down. But, to such a one as her, it had to be. And you must take it calm and face it; and if the baser sort back-bite you about it, you must pay no heed."

"I wouldn't marry him now if he was king of England," said Gilyan. "He's a good man and meant no harm."

" 'Tis little likely you'll be asked to marry him," answered Septimus. "This adventure's going to make him a bachelor for all time, I shouldn't wonder. Such things happening inside a man's soul often turn his milk to gall and change his character for the rest of his life. Put him out of your mind and keep your wits and try to make your grandmother see sense. That's what you've got to do."

"They are the two best friends I've got in the world—him and Betsy—and how can I keep my wits if they've fallen out? It's easy to preach after you're too old to feel," retorted Gilyan. "But this I know very well: I shan't have one hour's peace till they're friends again."

"They're friends this minute," answered Septimus, "because Betsy isn't going to quarrel with Warner. She isn't going to marry him—that's all."

"You talk like a stone! You'd best to go, or I'll scream. Don't you know what love means?"

She flamed, her bosom heaved, her wonderful eyes flashed.

"Why should anger always make a woman look lovelier, but a man look uglier, I wonder?" mused Mr. Wedlake, grinning at her. "I'll just peep in on 'Frog,' then I'll be gone as you tell me."

He ascended to Mr. Fawden's bedroom and a few minutes later Gilyan followed him with the baked apple, two pieces of buttered toast and a glass of whiskey and water.

Mark was exceedingly cheerful and felt sanguine that he would be restored to health and at work again in a few days. He gave Septimus some hints concerning the favourite haunts of the wild duck and presented half his buttered toast to the great dog which had ascended to his bedroom with Mr. Wedlake.

Soon both had departed and Gilyan found herself alone again beside her grandmother. The old woman recovered her calm and prepared to go to bed.

"Things will be as they will," she said, "and life has come to a climax, and I'm glad of it, for I can't bear no more."

"You must be brave enough to be humble, gran'," advised Gilyan. "Nobody's got more well-wishers than what we have. But there's some things we can take without any harm to our peace of mind."

"'Tis more what you will take than what I will," answered Jennifer, and Gilyan shook her head.

"I'll take nothing. And if you mean Warner, you can understand this. I do love him now, because life has shown me the manner of man he is. He's one in a thousand for pure goodness. But if I loved him ten thousand times better than I do, I wouldn't marry him. Never—never. It would bring a curse. Shall I be smaller about it than Betsy? If she can give him up because she thinks he loves me best, can I take him from her, even if he was to ask me? I'd sooner live the rest of my life in the gutter than do it."

"Then it's him will get what he deserves for being a slack-twisted fool," said Jennifer; "and the rest of us will get what we don't deserve, according to the usual plan."

"I'll make her take him back; I'll kill myself if she doesn't," vowed the younger, and Jennifer looked into Gilyan's eyes, while her chamber candle shook in her hand and set giant shadows dancing.

" 'Tisn't for you to talk of killing yourself," she said. "They that talk of it don't do it. There's no need for no such thing in your case. Leave that to them that are better away and whose value be ended. If all who cumbered the earth had the pluck to take 'emselves off it, there'd be more food and hope left for the useful ones."

CHAPTER XXX

THE FUTURE WILLED

THE hour was late, but Mrs. Lidstone and Matthew Fawden still sat and strove to find a way by which comfort for her age and relief from care might be reached for their ancient neighbour.

Upon this Sunday night synchronous events occurred to contradict each other, and ignorant of certain activities at Withy Lease, Mary racked her brains for means to relieve the situation, while, elsewhere, another's decisions promised to achieve an answer to the problem. Lucy had expressed impatience with her mother and gone to bed, while Warner, obeying a summons from Paul Neck, had long before departed to supper at 'Church House.'

It was this incident that led to the discussion of Gilyan's grandmother and the exasperation which, later, withdrew Lucy from the little conference.

"Why now should Paul have wanted the master?" mused Matthew. "Of all men one would think he was least inclined to Warner for the minute. And yet, such is his powers of reason, I can't but feel he'd never have sent to him unless there was a good cause for it."

Mary could throw no light.

"The position is this," she said. "Gilyan's stopping along with them at 'Church House,' and she may have something to do with it, or she may not. Paul came to see me, and he was very friendly and patient and shared my deep sorrow. But he had no word of anger for Warner. And somehow I feel a grain of hope still."

"How can you?" burst out Lucy. "You know Betsy

Neck. What's there to hope about? Is she the sort to change again? And why should she change?"

"You leave Gilyan out," answered Mary. "Betsy has yet got to hear what Gilyan will say when they meet, and as I happen to know Gilyan's view——"

"You don't—you may think so, but you don't," declared Lucy.

"I've seen her, my dear. I've listened to her, and she meant every word. She'd sooner go out of it altogether than stand between Betsy and your brother."

"What does that matter if Warner loves her? She knows she's safe enough in the long run. She knows the steadfast people she's got to deal with. She can say anything she likes and make any big promises she likes. It's all one. Betsy's lost to Warner. Gilyan's got Warner again. It's only a matter of time."

"She means what she says, Lucy. She's gone to her Uncle Paul with her mind made up."

"She's told you so, but what's her mind against Betsy's? I never did think to see you so blind, mother."

"Blind or seeing, the issue don't rest with me," replied Mrs. Lidstone. "What can I do—or Warner, for that matter? You've no call to run on so fast nor yet judge others so hardly. What you fear may happen, and I grant the thought was quite as hateful to me as you. But, since I've had speech with Gilyan, I'm bound to say two things. I don't feel no great fear now that it will happen, and I don't feel that if it did happen, we should have so much to fear as once we had. She's changed a lot. She's grown from girl to woman, and she's got a good deal of sense won from her troubles. She's fond of Warner, I believe, and she didn't deny it, and I thought the better of her for not pretending to; but Betsy's far more to her than Warner; and if we could hear them, I'll lay we'd find that she's doing her level best to get Betsy to come back to Warner."

"No doubt—well knowing that's impossible. Betsy's done with Warner, and Warner knows it. And you say what Gilyan's doing. But what's Gilyan's strength to Betsy's? It's what Betsy is doing tonight that I think upon, and well I know the line she's taking."

"You can't know," said Matthew.

They argued and Lucy became impatient. Her mind had moved quicklier than the older minds and she grew angry at last.

"I'll go to bed," she answered presently. "Else I'll be rude and say words that I suppose didn't ought to be said. But you'll live to see I'm right. There's only one thing on God's earth that can happen now, and that's going to happen—sooner or later. And whoever else knows it, or don't know it, I'll swear Gilyan does. So you fret for her grandmother's fate in vain. A time's coming when Warner will take very good care of Jennifer. If Gilyan's grown from girl to woman, Warner's grown from boy to man, and we'll soon feel the change as well as see it. Good-night, mother."

"Good-night, Lucy. And don't say your prayers till the bitterness be gone out of your heart, there's a dear."

The girl did not answer but left them; and then, without emotion, Mary spoke.

"I'm very much in sympathy with her, of course, but fretting and saying sharp things won't alter Providence. The affair be taken out of our hands by those that have to decide about it and we must hope for the best, because it's always childish to worry when you can't mend trouble. Meantime there's Jennifer, and the more I think upon her, the more fixed I am that she should give up Withy Lease once for all—sell it and come and live in a little house to Marldon if such can be found for her."

"What about my brother?"

"As you know, I'd be very pleased indeed if Mark was to come to us. That wet work ought to be give up at his age, and such a clever man as he is would soon fit in here and be useful for a good few more years.''

Matthew nodded satisfaction.

''I'm sure you wouldn't repent it. He can turn his hand to most things and would shine among us. He'd earn his keep and a bit over; and to get his money regular would be a great source of strength to him. Because wages at the Lease be a very doubtful question. Mrs. Purchase gives him what she can when she can, but there's no security, and I dare say if the truth was known, she's owing him pounds and pounds, though he wouldn't confess it.''

''The first thing is to get her to sell out, and I believe it might be done. The only other one to consider is Gilyan, who comes after her; and whatever happens, you may be assured Gilyan won't have no use for the place. She hates it.''

''So far,'' explained Matthew, ''my brother tells me that Jennifer feels she might be disposed to sell some of the water-meadows; but unfortunately she talks about a price that nobody in his senses would give. You might offer her a fair figure for the higher croft of the two and it would be very useful, though to clean out the fern and thistle is going to cost good money. But between friends business is always so difficult, and if she thought your offer was too low, or if you had to tell her she wanted far more than the ground was worth, then there'd be more pain and grief.''

''I'd give her what she asked if she would sell; but I think—at any rate, first—it would be far better if we could nerve her up to part with the lot and leave it. That would find her quite a decent bit of money, and she could live without hardship and in a self-respecting way on the interest; and Gilyan would have the capital after.''

''It sounds all right, but I doubt she'd give it a thought. The Lease is her life, in a manner of speaking—and if it was took from her she'd fade away. Not but what it wouldn't be a very good thing if he did, but of course, she don't know that."

"If I could take a buyer to see her, we might get her to say 'yes,' perhaps."

"Not so easy to find one. You'd have to advertise in the papers and such like. A man buying wouldn't want the reeds and might have no use for the withies. All you can say of it is that you've got a mud-heap to sell that might make useful land if it was drained; but half an eye will tell anybody that to drain it will cost a small fortune."

"We must try and seek somebody with more hope than you."

"I'm thinking of the price. I don't say you'll not find a purchaser; but I do say it's little likely anybody's going to name a price to suit Jennifer. But very likely your daughter's right, and if she is, we shall only have our trouble for our pains. Mrs. Purchase won't leave her beastly old house if any way offers for her to bide in it, and as for Mark, I dare say if he had to choose, he'd sooner mess about in the dirt there for nothing than work in the dry for good money."

"If we could get Jennifer out of it, then he'd come to me, I do believe," answered Mary.

And, meantime, in the night-hidden fens of Withy Lease, a bead of flickering light crept beside the river. It shook and trembled, and in summer time it surely would have been mistaken for *ignis fatuus* floating low upon the marsh; but no such phenomenon existed on this moony, winter night. Jennifer Purchase it was who threaded her way to the bridge beyond the reed beds. She carried a candle in a horn lantern and she murmured to herself as she went. A tall stick supported her and a shawl was wrapped over her head and bosom. Like some witch from old time she passed shadowy, and soon reached her destination and lowered her lantern to the frail structure that spanned the stream. Then she took a small meat saw from her shawl, unwrapped the paper in which it was covered and crossed to the farther side of the bridge. The rotten planks bent even beneath her light weight and, studying their supports, she began her work, cut through what scant timber sustained them and then retraced her path with utmost care and attacked the other side. Under the bridge the water ran deep and only slowed over shallows fifty yards below. It was a spot near to that where Gilyan had pretended to destroy herself in the past.

Having rendered the bridge completely insecure, the old woman took pains to hide her handiwork, for she had thought out every aspect of a self-appointed task. How sane she was might have been a question of doubt; but she remained sane enough to determine that her suicide should not be recognised as such. Behind the frantic determination to clear all by death, her intellect was sharp for details, and she did not desire that any question should arise afterwards to suggest that her end was other than accidental. The bridge had long been treacherous; even at this moment some new planks and stakes were assembled beside it, and Mark Fawden intended to devote a week to the construction of a new crossing when his health returned. But for the present he still remained indoors, and not until he had retired did Jennifer leave Withy Lease upon her errand. Gilyan was at 'Church House' and her grandmother pursued her operations without fear of interruption. She proposed to destroy herself the next morning. She would light the fire, make the breakfast and then go out for a bunch of water-cresses, telling Mark that she had done so. But she would not return. That was her plan, and now, with every detail clear and the bridge ready to play its part, self-pity flooded her ancient soul and assumed a singular expression. She believed that she was about to take a sane and dignified way out of her afflictions; but now that only a few hours separated her from death, Mrs. Purchase resented the necessity with a fierce and throbbing heart, and she turned in her impotence to the Conscious Will she held responsible.

"There, you Almighty Wretch!" piped Jennifer, shaking her fist at the stars. "And You can't even be sorry for me; You can't even pity me! Never a tear did You ever shed for one of the poor creatures You've broken. 'Tis You—You that make half the world a rubbish heap—not us! Not that I want pity. Give me justice if You know the meaning of it; let me have the peace in the next world You've never given me here. 'Twill be a masterpiece of wickedness if You don't, and not a pin to choose between You and the Dowl!"

Spitting and spluttering to herself, like a cat chattering at birds beyond his reach, did Jennifer thus arraign her God, and even while she did so and her croak rose through the large silences and gathering mists, there came, swift-footed, one with news to turn her sorrow into joy and change her desperate purpose. For in Higher Marldon also, the day had been pregnant with plans for the future.

The events crowned with great decisions at 'Church House' on Sunday night were preceded during Saturday by a meeting between Gilyan Lidstone and Betsy. The widow arrived early, found Sarah and Paul not particularly genial, but her friend unruffled and affectionate as ever. After a mid-day meal, the young women left the house together and sought a field-path beside a wood of pine, where they might walk and talk without interruption. There they listened to each other.

Gilyan wasted no time. She had travelled the field of this discussion on a thousand occasions, while waiting for it, and now declared her passionate purpose. Her voice fluttered and thrilled and presently she ceased to be mistress of herself and her emotion loosed tears.

"Hear me first, Betsy," she began.

"I will if you like, but I'm not sure if you won't be wasting your time, my pretty. Of course, I know much what you want to say, but is it worth while? A few honest words from you will be all that's needful before Warner comes tomorrow. I've told father not to prepare long speeches and a long face for Warner. It's so idle and needless. All there is to it is the answer to one question, and even that I needn't put to you, because I do think I know the true answer before I put it."

"Betsy," replied the other, "I'll answer no questions. I'm here to pray to you to do the right and only proper thing—to pray on my knees if you like. What you've done is killing me. I can't stand it and he can't stand it. There's not a shadow of right or reason in your going back on your promise to Warner. Oh, Betsy, why for do you do this fearful thing? Hear me, my dear love, that's always been so good to me. I'm younger than you, but older far in what I've lived through. Look back and use your great gift of sense. I threw the man over; but now I know what he is only less well than you do. Can you treat him the same as I did? Is it fair to him? Hasn't he suffered enough? Think, Betsy. He's just what he was when you took him. He's not altered. He loves you and he knows what you are. He's properly beggared all round now. And he don't understand a bit what he's done to turn you away. Yes, I understand—I grant I do. But it's only his nature to be full of compassion for them in trouble. You have made a great deal more of his kindness to me than you need. Wouldn't he have done the same for any other woman he was mixed up with? Wouldn't he have tried to make things better for any man or woman if it was in his power? And aren't there scores beside me, for that matter, that owe him gratitude? 'Twas a very unfortunate thing that I should be the one; but be fair to me—don't put this awful load on my shoulders, or accuse me of anything so base as trying to—— Ask yourself this. If it had been any other woman but me he'd served kindly, would you have turned him down on it? And—and I won't have it, Betsy. God's my judge you shan't give him up—you shan't."

It was at this point that Gilyan's tears broke her voice and the other turned from the pathway, put her arm into her friend's and entered the woods. Here was privacy. Soon they sat on a dry carpet of silver-grey foliage with the low boughs of a pine about them.

"Don't sob," said Betsy. "Listen and spare yourself. Nobody's blaming you, Gilyan. No sensible body is blaming one of us. You think I'm hard and cold-blooded—yes, you do. But you don't think I'm jealous, because you know me far too well for that. Love's beyond reason, but for once we can bring reason to it and we must—we must, Gilyan. I'll tell you all there is at the bottom of my heart, and you must be as honest with me. I've a right to that. You must tell me the solemn truth before we go out of this wood. I know it, mind, but I must have it out of your own lips."

Betsy paused, then she stroked the hand that held Gilyan's crumpled handkerchief.

"Of course I loved Warner," she continued, "else I'd never have promised to marry him. But how were things when I did? They were just the same as if you were dead, Gilyan. You'd gone to another man, and nobody knew that other man would soon be gone himself. I took Warner with my eyes open. I understood very well that he'd loved you in a sort of way he couldn't love twice. That wasn't hid from me. But he loved me none the less well enough to marry me, and I believed—perhaps because I dearly wanted to—that I'd make him a good wife and help him where I best might. Other causes made for it, too. His mother wished it very much; so did his sister. There he was, then, getting over his master-love, but only getting over it because you were dead to him for evermore. He loved you still, of course. Such love as he had for you couldn't die; but though he only loved you like we love the dead and gone, even so, it was love that made his eye shine and his breath come quicker when your name was named. I knew all that. I marked it. I thought upon it; yet it seemed natural; it didn't make me fear for the future—not till the future happened.

"But when your husband fell ill, and long before he died, I began to fear. And fear changed into certainty—still before Harold passed away. I never felt angry about it, Gilyan. I don't think I've been angry once. Who was there to feel angry against? If anybody was to come back from the grave, should we feel angry with 'em? When Jesus Christ brought back the dead to life, did their relations get angry about it? If they did, it was a hard line to take, for the risen ones could no more help being called back than you could when your poor husband died. But so it was: you were called back; and what you felt to him, Warner never stopped to think; but he couldn't alter what he felt to you. It was instinct and nature, and not all the reason in the world could stamp it out. It was just dumb, driving force beyond any power of his to change, or any pain or shame to stop. Not that it made the least difference to his word to me. It didn't make any difference to his feeling to me. I do think the better he loved you, the better he loved me. But that was because he's himself. His love for you woke his fierce conscience, and his conscience made him cry out to me to marry him quick; because in his simple man's mind, he thought you would be dead again the minute he married me. There's a lot like that, who imagine that marriage has got a bit of magic in it and wipes away the past, same as figures off a slate. They fancy that when love becomes a wrong thing, it will instantly die if you have been properly brought up. But love ain't a matter of a service in church. It's a greater and a fearfuller sacrament than marriage, Gilly. What I had to do was pretty clear to me from the first; and now that my father have heard me speak, it's clear to him, also.

I'd got to save Warner from himself, and, of course, I loved him well enough to do that. It came down to a very simple question for me and, looking back, I wonder now why I took such a long time to answer that question. But now I'll ask you just what I asked his mother, Gilyan, and you'll answer it the same as she did. What would you have done different from what I've done, if you had been in my place? Nothing. You'd have done exactly the same. No matter what your motives, you'd have done the like; because, whether from pride, or sense, or long sight of the future, you'd be far too sane a girl to marry a man who wanted you less than he wanted somebody else. So, it's not a question for me of what you'd like me to do, or what anybody would like me to do. There's only left what must happen, and if the happening hurts you, Gilyan, or hurts Warner, or hurts his mother, or hurts me, there's no more blame to anybody for hurting us, than we'd blame a dentist for pulling a tooth out. That's reason, and we've got to hide our aches."

Gilyan listened.

"You mean that I'm thinking of my own comfort, not yours, when I ask you to go back to him?" she said.

"That's for you to know best," answered the other. "Your own comfort—well, look at it. You know now how I stand; and as to that, there's more I might say to lessen your fret for me, Gilyan; but I can't well say it. Only believe this: I'm not doing such a valiant and wonderful thing as you fancy. I'm not sacrificing myself. I'm not going to lose my peace of mind, or go into a decline, or anything like that. What I've done wasn't done for you, nor yet Warner. Stick to that and don't forget it. It would have been just the same if I'd never known you and you were nothing to me. So you can let yourself out. And the next thing is me. I've told you part of how this is to me, and I've told you that there's no going back. If you died tomorrow, I wouldn't marry

Warner Lidstone now. I'll always care for him; I'll even always love him in a way; but marry him, never. So you can answer the great question I warned you against with an open, honest mind, and as faithfully as if God was listening instead of me. Be true to yourself. You must be, for that matter; but be true to me when you answer; and be true to him.''

''You'll never marry Warner—never?''

''Never, Gilyan.''

There was a pause; then the younger spoke.

''I know what you're going to ask me and I'm shamed to hear it. But you say you don't blame me.''

''I blame nobody, Gilyan. I only want to turn what is rough into what is smooth. Do you love him? That's the question you must answer. You know what love is now, and I'm not asking you to say you love him same as you loved his cousin; but do you love him and care about him enough to marry him a year hence, maybe, when he can ask you to do so? You know what you know, and your answer won't make any difference to me; but, of course, it will make all the difference to Warner. It will help me, too, for that matter, and lighten the road a good bit. I much want it to go right; but you mustn't think of what I want, or what he wants. You must be honest, Gilyan. It's cruel to ask you so soon, but it can't be helped now.''

''I love him, then. I love him with my eyes open. I love him dearly; but I love you a million times better. And what has my love done for you? How have I paid you?''

''If you love him, I can get on with it. I'm very glad. I'm glad for his sake, and I'm glad for yours, and I'm glad for my own. That's all I wanted to know before he comes. Leave the rest to me and don't you cry. There's nothing to cry about. Before God, I'd rather it went this way than any other. It's better; it's seemlier. I believe you love him. I believe you'll rise to it and face the difficulties and show you're all I think you, Gilyan, for his sake and for his mother's. Everything will depend upon you.''

''If it is to happen, I'll plan my life to please you, Betsy, and only you.''

''Then plan it to please him. He's easily pleased. What I'd like would be to hear his mother and sister say, presently, that the right thing had happened. They won't for a bit; but if you want to please me, work so as they will say so, when the time comes.''

''You're forgetting him. He wasn't a big enough pattern of man to see that your little finger's worth more than my whole body; but he's too big to turn back to me now. You can't ask him to do it.''

''He's a good man, but he must do what he must. You may leave Warner to me, and I'm very happy to be able to show him where he stands. Come now. We'll get back along to tea. And tomorrow night—I'm sorry it has to be thrust upon you so quick after all your sad sufferings and your great loss, my precious dear, but that couldn't be helped. You'll have peace and nothing more to fret about after tomorrow, because Warner's a tender and understanding man. Be very sure he'll think of your feelings and show no haste.''

''I'm in a miz-maze,'' said the younger. ''I don't know where I stand. I seem as if I was falling—falling away from reality. If you only knew half how I loved you, Betsy.''

''I do know,'' answered her cousin. ''I very well know and I'm glad you say that, because it shows you feel what I like you to feel. I'm vexed all this should have been thrust on you so quick. But life is terrible indecent sometimes. That's not our fault. We've got to behave decent in spite of all.''

They returned, and Gilyan, before that day was done, received consolation of a negative sort and heard Sarah Neck on the situation. None else was by at the time and

Sarah, who knew all that had happened and all that Betsy hoped would happen, spoke some edged words to Paul Neck's niece. They were thoughts that sprang from a heart wounded for Betsy's sake and indignant at the turn of events, despite the knowledge that these things could not have fallen out otherwise; but while Sarah was little concerned to soften her opinions out of any considerations for the widow, it happened that Gilyan felt in a mood to need tonic speech after her interview with her friend. What she heard, therefore, tended for sound psychological reasons to brace up and console rather than cast her down.

"If you want the truth for once in a way," said Mrs. Neck, "you can have it, Gilyan. You pretty women often go to your graves without knowing much about real life; but in your case you do know, because you was put through it. And now you're up against another trouble. And I'll tell you this to your face: you're not worthy to hold a candle to my step-daughter. And that, no doubt, ain't any great news. But I'll tell you more: Warner Lidstone ain't either."

"You can't think better of Betsy than I do," answered Gilyan meekly. "And you can't say too hard things against me, Aunt Sarah. And as for Mr. Lidstone—I suppose, with your knowledge of men—— However, no matter for that. I'll agree that it would be hard to find anybody worthy of Betsy. She's built on a bigger pattern than me—or you, Aunt Sarah."

"Don't drag me in, if you please. We're very sorry about it, your uncle and myself, and we've been very angry about it, I may tell you. But there's a light in your Uncle Paul that soon shows up the dark places, and Betsy is his daughter. He's going to speak to Warner Lidstone tomorrow, because he holds it his duty so to do; and if it pinches Warner's pride—well, he deserves it. And he isn't to think for a moment that Betsy is broke down over this, because she is not. In a word, she can do mighty well without him, since he's fool enough to care for you better than her.''

Which sentiments, while not intended as balm to Gilyan's troubled spirit, nevertheless acted with healing. The one thing that made life tolerable at this moment was—not that Warner loved her, for that she had long accepted; but that Betsy loved him less—so much less that the losing of him was going to be endurable to her. This thought both soothed and braced Gilyan. She clung to the idea, but concealed the satisfaction to be won from it.

''Every word you say is like a knife, Aunt Sarah,'' she answered calmly. ''And I deserve all you think and more. I'm a wretched woman, and I wish to Christ I'd never come in the world, and if I could add one hour of happiness to Betsy's life by going out of it, I would go.''

''People like Betsy must look for happiness to their equals,'' answered Sarah. ''Betsy's got her father, and she's got me; and in time to come there's little doubt that she'll get something worth talking about and a home of her own. The likes of her always give the world more than they get out of it. All the real fine people do. And the likes of you and Warner Lidstone always get far more than they give. And so you have, and enough said. I don't bear you no ill will, nor yet him; and you'll both be so fortunate as to have his mother over you; and the longer she stands at the head of Orchard Lands, the better. So go your way, and thank God, and try to pleasure Mary Lidstone when the time comes for taking the man.''

''That time's far off, however. I won't hear nothing about it yet.''

''As to that,'' answered Sarah, ''you'll be pleased to hear what your betters choose for you to hear, Gilyan. Your place is to obey and pleasure Betsy. And what she wills with Warner tomorrow must be your law, and his likewise. You can only save your faces before her and her father by doing as she tells you to do. And if you feel half you say for her, then your way should be clear.''

CHAPTER XXXI

THE FUTURE PLANNED

On Sunday evening, when Gilyan, with Sarah and Betsy, had gone to church, there came Warner Lidstone to keep his appointment. He found Paul Neck alone, and the great protest he had designed to utter went for nothing, because the innkeeper chose to speak rather than listen. Paul was stern, but not contemptuous. He pretended rather more than he felt and was not at heart sorry that the apple-grower would never marry Betsy. For him, even virtue, if allied with inherent weakness, had no charms. As Sarah had been outright with Gilyan, so now Paul accosted Mary's son; but the result was different. His words were resented and they served to increase Warner's passing tribulation rather than allay it. At first he smarted under a sense of wrong.

"You've come," said Paul, "and I'm glad you have done so, for there's things that must be said, and you can guess I was a good deal shocked and put about at first when this happened. Not now, however, because the more I have thought upon it, the clearer it came to look."

"I want you to listen to me, Mr. Neck," began the other. "There's two sides to this and I can't honestly feel——"

"You shall talk in due time, but, as the older man, I speak first, if you please. This affair is just an example of cause and effect, I may tell you, and I'm not blaming Betsy for a moment, though by your tone of voice you seem as if you were going to. I'm not blaming anybody, and if

I tell you what I think of you, you needn't feel vexed, any more than I should feel vexed if you told me what you thought of me. And I think this: Betsy is right and wise to change her mind, because you changed yours first, and, by that change, showed her you were not the fashion of man she took you to be. That, you might say, was to blame her for not reading you right; but there again you can't blame her, because it was only unexpected events gave her the chance to read you right. Thus it stands, then. If somebody hadn't lost her husband, then you'd have married Betsy. That's granted. But when a certain man dropped, all was changed. In another pattern of chap than you, nothing would have changed. The sort of man who would have resented being chucked by a woman in the first place, would never have thought of that woman again in any case—not if she'd been a hundred times free; and the sort of man who had the wits to see that Betsy was worth a thousand of the other every time—that man would never have changed either. But you weren't such a man, and when somebody was free, after all her sad adventures, you found yourself admiring her more than ever. It's all character, and against your weakness we've got to set your strength. Your weakness was to find you could love where you'd been spurned; your strength was to put the desire away from you and cleave to Betsy and want to go through with it. Because, where honour is the matter, I've got no quarrel with you. But you forgot one mighty important person in your clamour and haste to be wed to Betsy. And that was she herself. Betsy's a woman who has a bit of me in her, I must tell you. She loved you, because she did honestly think she was just the one, not only to be happy and content with you, but to make you more happy and content than ever you'd be without her. And she was perfectly right, so far. But when she saw how it really was, two things happened to Betsy, and she had to do one and feel the other. She didn't do one because she felt the other, mind you; but she did one, which was to break the match, since there was no other course open when she found the truth. And, having done that, she felt something; and that was that she had no more wish to marry you, Warner, because her view of you was altered. When this thing happened, of course Betsy saw that you were not the man she believed you to be; and I may tell you the truth that shone out of that. It's just this: you ain't built on the same high pattern as my Betsy. She wouldn't allow that for a moment, but it is so. What you've lost would take a bigger man than you to measure, no doubt—I say it quite kindly. But there's no tragedy, nor nothing like that. You are free and Betsy is free, and what more there is to it she'll tell you; and I've said all this open and plain, so that when you go afore her presently you'll not make a mistake, or pretend you're an injured party. When you came here half an hour ago, you thought you was, but now you know you are not. In fact, nobody's injured, and nobody's going to make a fuss, I hope. And now, if you got anything to say, get on with it."

"I only say this: that before my God, I came up here tonight to implore her to change her mind and marry me."

"That's no news. Just because I knew that, I've talked to you like I have. We're all very fond of you and always shall be. I don't know a more likeable man than you. More don't my daughter; but far from wanting to stand between you and your true happiness, she's only wishful to advance that happiness. So now, you can hear Betsy; and then you'll know she's your very good friend still. And if that don't prove the large-minded wonder she is, nothing can."

"You make me feel pretty much like a naughty schoolboy," said Warner, "and, no doubt, that's how you look at me and how you want me to feel. But if Betsy takes the same line——"

"Last thing she'll do. Didn't she judge you well enough to wed you? You just let yourself be yourself and listen to her, and you'll hear things that will help to make you a happy man in time. And that's what we all hope for you."

Following on these remarks the supper party was a restrained affair and, indeed, only Paul and Sarah had much to say. They discussed general subjects and left the vital matter alone. They were gracious and pressed their guests to eat and drink; but constraint silenced both Gilyan and Warner; the man felt in reality like a schoolboy, and smarted at his position. He did not want to hear Betsy and desired only to be gone. Gilyan, however, already knew what was coming and felt no doubt of the sequel. Her thoughts ran more upon what must afterwards happen. Already she planned to leave the Marldons for a long time; for she guessed the spirit of scorn and resentment that must presently awaken at the coming event. Her relations might be generous about it; the Marldons would not be.

After supper, the rest quitted the parlour and left Betsy alone with Warner. She had helped a maid to clear the table, and when that task was done she came to the moody man, put her hand upon his shoulder and bade him light his pipe. But he was much perturbed and she saw it.

"Would you rather walk out?" she asked. "The night's fine. I'll walk if you'd be happier so. And I want Gilyan to come with us, if you'll let her. It is the natural, simple thing, Warner. There's just we three, and all equally interested."

"I'm in your hands," he answered wearily. "I don't know what it all means, or why these things are happening. I've heard your father; he didn't spare me; now I must hear you. But I stand where I stood, Betsy."

"You do, Warner. That's exactly the whole truth. You stand where you stood. And, what's more to the point still —but wait for Gilyan."

"I don't see what she's got to do with it. I don't want her in this talk. This has hit her terrible hard, I may tell you. For there's a lot of wicked people about will say she was at the bottom of it. And you know whether that's true."

"I've spoke to her. We understand each other very well, and now you've got to be reasonable, dear Warner, and understand, too, and not do or say anything unworthy of you. Everything is as clear and straightforward as need be and if you only—— I'll call Gilyan."

In five minutes the three went out together. It was a night of moonshine and stars. Already a faint film drifted southward from the sea and promised rain before morning.

"Warner's just told me he stands where he stood, Gilyan," began Betsy; "and I've told him I know it. Then I was going to tell him something much more important than that, but I waited for you. Now you two musn't mind my plain talking, for I'm dearly fond of you both and I want you to be happy, and I'm happy myself tonight to think we've got to the end of this coil and can all sleep in peace. First, there's the thing that's hurting Warner so much: that I've decided not to marry him. About that I must tell him straight that I've changed my mind and don't feel I want to marry him now. So, of course, I've got to say so. But he thinks it's a wilful thing for me to do and it puzzles him still why I have."

"No, Betsy—not if you feel a change. I very well understand from your father there's things in me you find you couldn't live with. But they're unconscious things and would die after we were married."

"If there's things in you I couldn't live with, you never tried to hide them. You couldn't. They had to appear.

But that's a small matter, and whatever father says wouldn't count against a far greater thing. You love Gilyan better far than ever you could love me. That's nature and altogether beyond your power to alter; and it's nature that she, having been through all she has, and seen what you did for her and Harold through that terrible sad time—it's very natural indeed that she should now look at you different from what she did in the past. Life alters our view of our fellow creatures, and it parts those who thought they never could be parted, and it draws others who thought they never could be drawn. Life melts some people together like that, and it freezes some people apart. We're always changing our opinion about even our relations. You know that's true. And now, Gilyan loves you, because she can't help it, and you love her—far better than anything in the world—because you can't help it. And, for love of me, you've both fought against this with all your silly strength. And now the good luck for us is that everything has come clear as the moon and we can be happy again.''

''Never,'' said Gilyan.

''My dear sweet, don't say that, because you know it isn't true. I'll be the selfish one and beg for favours. There's one thing in this world my heart's set on—one thing before everything—and it's a reasonable and right thing, and leaves us true to ourselves and to each other. I want you to be married inside a year from now, when you can come together; and there's a bigger reason than your love of me, Gilyan. There's a bigger reason even than your love of Warner. There's a beautiful, fine reason you should wed, and that's the wish of Harold. Yes, he hoped for it to happen. He forgot all about me for a minute. He was in the shadow of death by then and knew what he meant to do, and he quite forgot where I stood. You do forget small things when the big thing of dying lies right before you, I expect. But he never forgot Gilyan, and he knew that Warner would make a husband for her where she would be safe. He'd be glad about this."

Neither spoke when she ceased. Then, after a pause, she appealed to them.

"Can't you pleasure me, my dears? If you can't why is it? Shall I go away and let you think on it?"

The man felt that the answer rested with him.

"Betsy," he said. "We've got no secrets from you and couldn't hatch 'em if we would. Our thoughts have run on you and only you these many days, and Gilyan came up here full of great hopes to change you. We've never spoke one word that wasn't about you, and she'd seen me do nought but fret and fume because you wouldn't name the day. And since you decided against, she's heard nothing but my dismay and wonder."

"That's right, Warner," murmured Gilyan.

"Of course it was right," answered Betsy. "Don't you see how right it was? To you he came for sympathy in his trouble. And why did he come to you, Gilyan? Because every instinct bade him do it. And to you he'll always come, in joy or sadness, because you are the rightful one to share everything. He loves you and you love him, and everything cries out you should live your lives together. You must—you can't live apart; and if you tried you'd be hurting your best and dearest friend on earth; and that's me; and your best friend in the other world, and that's Harold. That's God's solemn truth and you both know it."

"If it is," answered Warner, "then at your command, Betsy, I will marry Gilyan if she can marry me. I'm in your hands, and if it's ever in my power to show you what I feel about this night's work, I will do it."

"Kiss her then," said Betsy, "and come in and tell father and Sarah. You can keep it secret from everybody else or not as you please. We'll do as you bid us. But two should know, and that's your mother, Warner, and Gilly's grandmother."

"I'll never love you like I love Betsy," said Gilyan to the man, and he answered:

"No, and I'll never be worth loving like her."

Then Betsy left them and hastened home again. She came where Paul and Sarah were sitting alone together, and they knew by her face that all was well.

"I've done it!" she said. "It was easy enough. They're little wiser than a pair of children—oh, and they're happy, Sarah—under their misery!"

The elders were both moist-eyed, but Betsy showed no emotion other than unshadowed joy.

"Say nought to 'em but what's kind," she begged.

In half an hour Warner and Gilyan returned, only to hear unqualified congratulations. They were very subdued and had planned an immediate action. Of the future they did not speak, though its assurance shone in their eyes. For the moment Warner desired to return to his mother and Gilyan meant to go home and tell Jennifer that her anxiety was at an end.

"I'll sleep in her bed beside her," said Gilyan. "'Twill be a joyful surprise and rest her poor, fretted soul."

She left them to pack a little "hold-all" and in ten minutes the man and woman had departed.

At the door Warner shook hands with Betsy, after Gilyan had kissed her, broken down and gone on her way.

"You're a masterpiece," he said. "I can't speak about it yet. But if you could look in my heart, Betsy——"

"I know what I should see, my dear man. Never was a better heart than yours."

The pair said little as they descended the hill. Only once Gilyan spoke.

"Is it true? Is it true?" she asked.

At Orchard Lands she took her bag from him and made him leave her.

"Go swift to your mother now, afore she's to bed, and come and see gran' in the morning," directed Gilyan. "And kiss me and hug me very close. A year will pass ever so quick—now we know what's at the end of it."

"I'm dreaming yet," he answered.

And so they parted.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE FUTURE ACCOMPLISHED

Despite what dawn would bring, Jennifer slept soundly for some hours, but wakened before it was light. She rose, confirmed in her purpose; her only desire was to be done with life as swiftly as possible. She had told Mark on the preceding evening that she would fetch him a bunch of water-cress for his breakfast, and he had begged her to do no such thing.

Grey rain drifted over the winter flats and it amused the old woman to reflect that she need not trouble to cover her head or keep her feet dry. Then she remembered the necessity for making death appear unpremeditated; therefore, she put on her pattens and her bonnet and shawl and took an old umbrella with her.

Once more she addressed herself to the dim sky.

"*You* know," she said, "and only You shall know."

Her mind ran upon her brother—a man who had perished, in the prime of life, at a railway crossing.

"They said it was a fatal accident, along of you being market-merry, George; but I knew better. I knew your home," she thought.

A sulky peep of day filtered down through the rain and the valley lands were clad in mist. Through it starkly thrust the trees, flinging up naked branch and bough into the leaden light.

"Be quick, be quick!" cried Jennifer to herself.

Then she came to the bridge and found it had disappeared. A few timbers floated about and something yellow struck a raw dab of colour between the drab tones of earth and water. It was stranded at the ancient woman's feet in a shallow, and she saw that her grand-daughter's little cane "hold-all" lay there, half submerged.

For a moment the old woman was silent and motionless, while no sound broke the still hour but the whisper of the river. Then her thin voice cut the fog and she shrieked and shrieked again.

A quarter of a mile distant, James Woodley sat on one plough horse and led another. He was speculating as to whether the weather would mend, or grow worse. The man and horses were descending a little hill to arable land now being broken. He stopped, heard the cry, shook his horses into a trot and presently, reaching a gate, tethered them there and ran whence the voice had come.

An hour later, a dozen men were working at the brook, but Jennifer had returned home. Mark Fawden came out, despite the rain, and with the help of others he brought his punt from the rond, and with it a net that he used for catching coarse fish. Police were with him, and his brother and Warner Lidstone from Orchand Lands.

Weighting the net they dragged with it, and so found the object of their search and drew her back to the earth again. The chatter hushed and men shouted and directed each other no more. Her face, smothered in her drowned hair, made them silent. Her garments clung close and showed the lovely lines of her, as of a Greek statue, where the drapery makes more exquisite the body beneath. Her countenance revealed neither joy nor sorrow, hope nor fear. Not one human emotion clouded its wondrous and impassive loveliness. In the categories of death there is no place for happiness or grief; and so it was with young Gilyan then.

Warner helped to carry the hurdle on which they bore her to Jennifer, and then he vanished from among them, unable to listen to any human voice or longer face the light of day. He returned to his home and, passing the door of the cider mill, thrust it open and shut it again behind him. The place was still and deserted now. Only a faint, faded apple reek hung upon the air. The steel screw of the press towered up, dimly shining, and all else was darkness. He flung himself down in a corner on some canvas and old rope; and there he lay, motionless, only half sensible, hour after hour. Little, swift-pawed things, that fear man, crept out again and pattered hither and thither. Overhead, patient Arachne mended the web that he had torn away. But his sister knew where he had gone, and at twilight his mother came to him.

DATE DUE

JUN 5 1944
JUL 19 1951
FEB 19 '52
JUL 11 1983
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Phillpotts, Eden
Cheat the boys